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CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THAI MOVIES AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF
FILMS IN THAILAND

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Kultida Boonyakul Dunagin, B.A., M.A.

Denton, Texas

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(12)

Dunagin, Kultida Boonyakul, Cultural Identity in Thai Movies and Its Implications for the Study of Films in Thailand, Doctor of Philosophy (College and University Teaching), August, 1993, 156 pp., 3 tables, bibliography, 84 titles.

Movies have been one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Thailand for several decades. Thai people attend movies primarily to be entertained. However, the movie industry generates a large amount of money and creates thousands of jobs. Although it can be a valuable asset to the economy of the country, the survival of film art is sometimes in jeopardy. At present, the popularity of video tapes and improved television programs pose a major threat to the movie industry.

The primary purpose of this study was to find the content and form of movies which conform to the taste of the majority of Thai audiences and, at the same time, are universal enough to attract international audiences. Because film is an extension of other art forms, this required extensive research into the roots of Thai performing arts.

Extensive study of the history of Thai films, Thai culture, the characteristics of Thai people, and the

problems faced by the film industry in Thailand was the foundation for this attempt to determine the content and form of ideal Thai movies. Suggestions for the improvement of film curriculum was also briefly discussed. Eleven film directors, two film instructors, a film censorship section inspector, and a number of university students and factory workers on the outskirts of Bangkok were interviewed.

Major findings from the study and the interviews include the following:

1. The content of Thai movies began as imitations of the characteristics of stage plays and then evolved into a separate form with its own traits. The direction of Thai movies has been toward more direct copy of Western movies. No unique aspects of Thai format has emerged.

2. At present, the copying of Western movies in both form and content remains unavoidable. However, within the past two decades, an ideal content for Thai movies has emerged. It is a combination of the highest level of duplication of the content of Western movies and a true understanding of Thai culture, its people, the economy, and the sociopolitical situations of particular periods of time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Howard W. Smith, Jr., advisor and dissertation chairman, Dr. Steve Fore, minor professor, and other members of my doctoral committee for their direction, guidance, and invaluable comments. Special gratitude and love are offered to my parents, Dr. Sawat and Kanya Boonyakul, and my husband, Gary A. Dunagin, who has provided moral, emotional, and financial support throughout the long period of time that I have worked on this study. Without them this dissertation would have taken much longer to complete. A special note of appreciation goes to U-sa Vatcharinsavee, a dear friend, who offered assistance after I moved away from Texas.

Finally, I would like to express gratitude to Dome Sukvong, Vijit Khunavutt, Somboonsuk Niyomsiri (Piek Poster), Pakorn Promvitak, and Somdej Santipracha, whose enthusiasm and interest in this study encouraged me to work harder to complete it.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Going to a movie is almost a form of ritual in several Thai communities, especially those in rural areas. The movie theater is a place where Thai families and friends gather after a long week of hard work or school. Sometimes it is even more than a favorite pastime; it is a world of fantasy, where moviegoers can temporarily immerse themselves and forget about what is going on in the real world. Dome Sukvong, the founder of the National Film Archives of Thailand, related his experiences as a boy going to movies with his parents. For him, it was the most exciting experience he could remember. Because it was a special occasion, he would spend extra time grooming and dressing himself, have a special dinner, and then take "a journey" to the movie theater (Sukvong 1992). For Thai children, as with children around the world, movies are a magical world. For adults, movies offer a means of escape from the harsh realities of the real world.

Unfortunately, the history of Thai movies is not as pleasant as the experience offered to movie audiences. The history of Thai movies is one of a long and difficult

struggle. It seems that everything has worked against the development of the Thai movie industry.

Movies have been made in Thailand for about as long as they have in other countries of the world. According to Dome Sukvong (1992), S. G. Marchovsky and his company showed the first movie to the public in Siam (now Thailand) on June 10, 1897 (Sukvong 1990, 4). Three years later, His Royal Highness, Thongtham Thavalyavong, one of the brothers of His Majesty King Rama V of Siam, brought a camera and all the necessary equipment into the country and began filming movies which he showed to the public (Sukvong 1990, 4).

Although movies have been made in Thailand for more than ninety years, movie makers have not accurately incorporated Thai culture. In both form and content, Thai movies are purely a product of the West, especially Hollywood, even though Thai and American audiences perceive movies very differently. While the performing arts in the West aim at realistic portrayal of events and characters, those in Thailand consider realism as only a part of the whole performance. Thai audiences are constantly aware that what they are watching is only a performance (Eeosrivong 1973, 49). American cinema analyzes the psyche of individuals as they relate to themselves and to society, and then expands to the problems of society as a whole. Thai audiences, on the other hand, do not seem interested in

viewing societal problems on the movie screen. This does not mean that moviegoers in Thailand do not want to acknowledge or try to solve problems of society. It only means that these are not their major concerns when viewing movies. Thai audiences prefer movies that present the world as they want it to be.

After almost a century of movies in Thailand, one question persists: What is it that people in Thailand really want to see? Movie producers and directors are constantly faced with this question. Although most Thai directors and producers prefer to make movies that raise the audience's level of appreciation for educational and artistic films, they are faced with the fact that such movies do not attract large numbers of Thai moviegoers. Thus, some producers continue to produce movies that most critics regard as trash. These movies, which are far from being called artistic creations, seem to offer characteristics that Thai audiences want to see.

The resultant two groups of filmmakers have conflicting interests in this problem. The first group is made up of traditional filmmakers who claim that moviegoers go to the movies to be entertained. They believe that theater is a place to temporarily escape from everyday reality. Without formal education in either the process or literary aspect of movie production, this group of filmmakers has only a vague

idea of what a truly good movie should be. As a result, they tend to take the easy route by copying successful movies. Businessmen who offer financial backing to these filmmakers are not interested in the creation of film classics--they are interested only in box office success. As a result, their movies are harshly criticized by scholars and well-educated audiences.

In 1973, Nithi Eeosrivong, a history professor at Chiangmai University, wrote that there was no argument that Thai movies were affected by outside influences, especially American cinema. Assimilating outside technology into the Thai culture is not something new. Several forms of Thai performing arts have come from other countries. Because of the confusion that exists concerning the types of messages that movies can convey best to Thai audiences, it is logical that moviemakers show the world what their audiences are familiar with, as has been done in other forms of arts in Thailand. Consideration of movies as part of the development of the overall Thai performing arts reveals a connection between Thai movies and other forms of performing arts. Movies are, in fact, an extension of the performing arts. Even the word Naang, which means movie in Thai was borrowed from Naang Yai, which is a form of shadow puppet. This terminology clearly reflects the fact that Thai people

do not distinguish movies from all the other forms of performing arts (Eeosrivong 1973, 46).

Spearheaded by Eeosrivong, several educators looked at the Thai movie industry from a completely different point of view. Their efforts led to the conclusion that Thai movies that once were looked down upon by everyone are not without merit after all.

The second group of filmmakers consists of well-educated intellectuals who prefer to bring Thai movies closer to an art form, based on American filmmaking rules. Unfortunately, in their struggle, members of this group have lost touch with the majority of the audience, which is very much grounded on the influences of national culture, performing arts, literature, and everyday living. Several movies have been made and praised for their extensive use of film language; however, the majority of Thai people cannot relate to them.

Discrepancies between what moviemakers want to put on the screen and what audiences want to see are not minor ones. They have caused several newcomers to the industry to turn their backs on moviemaking forever, and have resulted in several disasters for several veteran filmmakers. Filmmakers who have chosen to stay have found it difficult to determine what kind of movies to make in order to attract audiences.

As a Thai film critic once commented, there are no rules and regulations in making movies in Thailand. Film subjects revolve around stories of royalty, problems in the family, feuds between housewives and mistresses, and idiotic comedy. Most filmmakers still make movies according to what the market wants. It is "like rowing a boat in a small pond," there seems to be no way out (Bangsaparn 1984a, 52). There is, however, a way out of the dilemma, if everyone concerned looks at the problem with an open mind. Both groups of filmmakers contribute to the content and form of Thai movies, and a middle ground where they can meet must be found. This was the aim of this study.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this study was to describe dominant cultural characteristics of Thai performing arts, with an emphasis on cinema, and their implications for the study of films in Thai universities.

Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this study were (a) to study the characteristics of Thai performing arts which are the products of Thai culture, morality, everyday living, and the socio-political system; (b) to develop an understanding of how and why only movies which conform in form and content to such characteristics are appealing to Thai audiences; (c) to

analyze differences between Western (especially Hollywood) trends in movies and performing arts and Thai movies in order to determine why Thai audiences cannot relate to the subjects, content, and form which some educated Thai filmmakers have incorporated into their movies; (d) to provide guidelines to film producers and directors concerning the tastes of movie audiences in Thailand and to help them better understand their target audiences; and (e) to shed new light on the study of filmmaking in Thailand. This study was an exploratory project for looking at Thai movies as a part of the society and as an extension of classical culture and literature.

Research Questions

In order to carry out the purposes of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the foundations of Thai culture which influence Thai literature, the performing arts, and movies?
2. What are the characteristics of Thai classical drama which are extended into movies?
3. What are the differences between Thai and Western cultures in relation to how they influence the success or failure of Thai movies?
4. What are the characteristics of movies, in terms of form and content, that appeal to Thai audiences?

Significance of the Study

Because filmmaking has only recently been taught in colleges and universities in Thailand, few serious studies have been completed about any aspect of movies there. As an exploratory project in the study of movies made in Thailand, this research provides a new perspective for both filmmakers and educators. Instead of looking at Thai movies with contempt because they do not conform to Western definitions of movie arts, Thai filmmakers may realize that Thai movies should follow their development to maintain cultural identity rather than using the rules and ideas formulated in Hollywood. Filmmakers and educators may see that the culture, concepts, beliefs, and way-of-life of the people who live in these two parts of the world are different.

Dissanayake points out that the concept of cinema as an art form was introduced to Asia from the West. As it took root in many Asian countries, cinema began to evolve into a medium for artistic expression of deeper currents and for shaping the influence of culture. A constant struggle emerged, however, between the imported influence of the medium and the unyielding will to bend it in the service of exploring indigenous experiences and culturally sanctioned values, beliefs, and lifestyles (Dissanayake 1988, I).

The acceptance of performing arts techniques from the outside world is not new to Thailand. Several forms of performing arts have been adopted from other countries. The performing arts have been modified and adapted to serve the Thai community in transmitting information from its sources to the public. Eeosrivong mentions that movies are also a new form of the performing arts. Few, if any, filmmakers in Thailand understand what kind of information movies can communicate best. As a result, it is not unusual for movies to be used to show Thai audiences the world and to transmit the messages with which Thai audiences are already familiar from other art forms (Eeosrivong 1973, 48). Eeosrivong emphasizes that when movies are regarded as a part of the development of the performing arts, the same characteristics are seen in the movies as in every other form of performing arts. Thai audiences do not take performing arts as seriously as do American audiences. They do not regard movies as an art form which is unique in itself, with its own look and characteristics.

One serious problem faced by filmmakers in Thailand is the lack of money to produce movies. Inadequate funds have kept the quality of Thai movies low. Manob Udomdej, a talented director, claims that low pay within the film industry in Thailand is a weak point in making movies. He suggests that a lack of funds is one of the reasons movies

in Thailand cannot be fully developed. Moviemakers often have families to support. Once they finish making one movie, they have to survive on the small amount of money they earn from it without knowing when the next project will come. It is difficult for moviemakers to think clearly about a new idea for the next movie when they are worried about taking care of their families' basic needs (Ekutta and Chareonsri 1992, 164). Many filmmakers have to have another job which provides a regular income. Everyone in the industry agrees that the way to solve this problem is to expand the market for Thai movies to other countries. However, most Thai filmmakers have the mistaken idea that to be marketable in other countries, their movies must be based on Hollywood's format, style, and taste.

Dissanayake suggests that two words best explain this form of misconception. The first, "internationalization," describes the process by which a kind of international cinema, in terms of both style and content, has been emerging, largely as a result of the impact of Hollywood (Dissanayake 1988, 7). Because Hollywood movies have been accepted everywhere in the world, the new generation of filmmakers in Thailand believe that their success is attributable to the fact that American movies are internationalized. Internationalization is different from universality. Yasujiro Ozu and Satyajit Ray, famous

Japanese and Indian filmmakers, have made movies which are accepted all over the world, and neither has attempted to blindly copy Hollywood movies. Their movies are not internationalized but universal.

The second word, "universality," describes the quality of drawing out the common humanity, the timeless essence of human experience that transcends territorial boundaries. The quality of universality is present in all good artistic films. At one level, an experience bears all the inevitable marks of its cultural milieu--the topography, the weight of tradition, the force of convention, the overpowering presence of myth and ritual--in short, the symbolic universe that has been associated with a given cultural milieu (Dissanayake 1988, 6).

Based on Dissanayake's (1988) suggestion, it becomes obvious that this generation of filmmakers started in the wrong direction. By blindly copying the American tradition of moviemaking, they placed themselves on a dead-end path. The findings of this study suggest a different direction. Filmmakers should start by understanding their own culture and audience. Universal movies can be made from a local subject and a local outlook. What is needed first, however, is a true understanding of the culture.

Satyajit Ray suggests that rather than compete with Hollywood filmmakers, who have immeasurably more financial

and technical resources, Asian filmmakers should make a virtue of the undeniable constraints with which they must contend and, thus, create a different kind of cinema (Ray 1976, 21). What Asian cinema needs is not more gloss, but more imagination, more integrity, and more intelligent appreciation of limitations of the medium (Dissanayake 1988, 22). The same fact applies to Thai movies. To copy and attempt to compete with Hollywood leads to disaster. The goal for Thai moviemakers should be to universalize rather than to internationalize.

The results of this study can be the start of a new direction for teaching filmmaking in Thailand. Instead of teaching the history and theory of American films, the time has come to start looking at movies as a part of Thai culture, and to try to understand how it has been influenced by other forms of art.

Definition of Terms

Dissanayake provides excellent definitions of national identity, culture, and cultural identity. These definitions are used in this study because they have restricted meanings.

National identity is defined as the recognition that a person's homeland and personal identity are largely determined by his or her identification with that homeland.

Political, social, economic, cultural, and psychological questions of varying magnitude enter into this conceptualization (Dissanayake 1988, 4).

Cultural identity forms a part of the larger entity which is national identity. A nation may consist of several different cultures, each with its own sense of history, myth, ritual, and uniqueness (Dissanayake 1988, 2).

Culture is the system of meanings by which humans externalize and communicate the significances that they attach to their own actions as well as those of others, and to the environment that they inhabit (Dissanayake 1988, 2).

The words filmmaker and moviemaker are used throughout this study, and collectively represent the directors, editors, scriptwriters, and camera operators who employ their expertise in making movies.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study was the absence of scholastic studies of Thai movies. Most of the studies done in the past dealt with the history and development of the film industry in Thailand. They did not include in-depth analysis of any movies.

A second limitation was imposed by the source of information used--articles from various magazines, journals, and newspapers. Most of the articles used were written

subjectively to present a writer's point of view about the conditions of the movies during a particular time period. Few of the writers cited were true scholars of films. Eeosrivong (1973), who provided the principal inspiration for this study, was a brilliant historian. Most Thai movie critics have no educational background in film criticism. They are self-taught individuals who learned mainly from watching many movies and from reading books imported from the United States. For this reason, most of the critics are near-sighted--they tend to indicate that anything that deviates from the books they have read is not worth watching.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORY OF THAI MOVIES

There are two words that mean movie in Thai, naang and phabphayont. Naang, which is less formal than phabphayont, was borrowed from a form of performing arts using shadow puppets which is popular in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. In Thailand there are two types of shadow puppets, naang yai and naang talung.

There is no accurate record of when and how naang yai began in Thailand. The earliest mention of this form of shadow puppet performance appeared in 1556 during the reign of King Narai the great of Ayuthya (a former kingdom of Thailand). King Narai ordered a new story to be written for performance on his twenty-fifth birthday, which he planned to be a big celebration. Most story plays in naang yai are based on classical literature, especially the Thai version of Indian Ramayana. No one knows for certain whether Thai shadow puppets were copied from Indonesia or Indonesian shadow puppets were copied from Thailand. Thai shadow puppets (both naang yai and naang talung) have several characteristics which are similar to the wayang furwa of Indonesia (Krumcharoen 1983, 26). Wayang furwa, an ancient

form of shadow puppet in Java, has been in existence since before the Hindu civilization was adopted in Indonesia. Present-day Indonesian wayang characters are as small as the characters in naang talung.

Naang talung, a more popular form of shadow puppets, is performed mostly in rural areas. The style for naang talung is more informal than that of naang yai. The language used is sometimes vulgar, and the stories are not always faithful to the original script. The puppeteers comment on every day political events through the comic characters and sometimes even talk to the audience through them. Comic characters are the major attraction in naang talung because audiences can relate better to them than to heroes and heroines.

The characters for shadow puppets are made of water buffalo skin. Naang yai characters are much larger than those of naang talung (yai means big). Puppeteers dress up in a traditional costume and manipulate the characters in front of a screen. The screen is lighted from behind. Naang talung is the opposite--both the puppets and the puppeteer are behind the screen.

The first record of the use of the word naang to describe other forms of light and shadow shows apart from shadow puppets appeared in 1857. Rachothai, an interpreter for a group of Thai ambassadors to England mentioned in his memoirs a kind of show which projected enlarged photographs

through the lens onto the screen (Sukvong 1982, 48). He called it naang. Thus, it is obvious that the word naang was used to describe a kind of show characterized by the play of light and shadow on white cloth screen even before Marchovsky brought his cinematograph to Bangkok in 1897 (Sukvong 1982, 48).

The other word for movie in Thai, phabphayont, is equal to "animated picture" or "animated photography" in English, and means a picture that is brought to life. There is no official record of when the word phabphayont was first used in place of naang. In January 1904, a movie traveling troupe showed a film in Bangkok. Their advertisement in the Sunday, January 25, Bangkok Times was as follows:

The moving automations (Huun Phayont) which project the shadow as a large picture on the screen at His Highness Luenrit's theater will be at the 29th of this month. The door will be opened at 7:30 p.m. The show will start at 8:00 p.m. (Sukvong 1982, 56).

This is the first evidence that the Bangkok Times called a movie moving automations or Huun Phayont rather than naang faraang, or Western movie, which movies had been called for seven or eight years (Sukvong 1982, 56). Huun means automation, model, or puppet in English. Phayont means moving by machine.

On July of the same year, another traveling troupe, called the American Bioscope and Phonograph, arrived in Bangkok. They brought with them a kind of picture show

called Bioscope and a phonograph. Advertisements in the Bangkok Times never mentioned naang faraang again.

The word phabphayont finally appeared in the Bangkok Times on December 10, 1904, in a news article about the picture show of Royal Japanese Cinematograph, a movie troupe from Japan. The news read:

On Thursday the 8th of this month while the showing of a "phabphayont Yeepun" (Japanese movie) was in progress, there was a sound of several dishes breaking. Nobody knew for certain if it was the carelessness of the vendors or something else (Sukvong 1982, 57).

Sukvong (1982) compared all the words which mean movie in English to those in Thai. The word film derived from filmen, an Anglo-saxon word which means a thin layer on the surface of boiled milk. The word is also used to signify anything that has the form of thin membrane, such as human or animal skin. In this case, it can be compared to the Thai word naang, which originally meant the skin that envelops human or animal flesh. In the terms naang talung and naang yai, it means water buffalo skin dried under the sun and bleached to make it transparent. This skin, which is used as a material to make naang characters, is cut into the form of certain characters, fretted with different designs, and then painted.

Later on, the word film was used to signify the thin celluloid strip covered with a light sensitive chemical used

in photography and cinematography. In this sense, the word film is used in the same way as naang (Sukvong 1982, 61).

The original meaning of phabhavont is pictures that are brought to life, which is comparable to animated picture in English. However, it can also cover a wider range of meaning, such as cinematograph, kinematograph, motion picture, moving picture, cinema, and movie. All of these words mean moving picture. It also has the same meaning as bioscope, biograph, and living picture, which all mean "pictures which are alive" (Sukvong 1982, 61).

Periods of Development

The development of movies in Thailand can be divided roughly into the following eleven periods.

European and American Dominance

The history of movies in Thailand began in 1896, when King Rama V visited Singapore and Java. On the tenth of August of that year he had an opportunity to watch movies from an Edison's kinestoscope. He was the first Thai to watch a movie (Sukvong 1990, 3). In the following year, S. G. Marchovsky and his company brought Lumiere's cinematograph to Siam. They showed it to the public for the first time in Siam on the tenth of June (Sukvong 1990, 3). The first show was not very popular among the Siamese.

Eight years later, a Japanese merchant constructed a temporary theater on an empty lot next to the present day Sala Chalerm Krung (one of the oldest movie theaters which shows only Thai movies). Because a Japanese person showed the movies, the audience thought that the Japanese made them. As a result, this type of entertainment was called Japanese movies for several years after it was first introduced to the public in Bangkok. In actuality, the movies were French. They were made by the Pathé Company. The first package of French movies shown in Siam included a war between Japan and Russia. It showed the incident when a troupe of Japanese soldiers attacked Port Arthur fortress. Another French movie was about cities in Japan. These shows were very popular among the people in Bangkok, and the theater was packed every night. The package of movies included twelve reels of movies. Each reel was 500 feet long. Shows began at 8:00 p.m. and ended at 10:00 p.m. (Sukvong 1990, 4).

When other Japanese businessmen saw that the traveling movie shows had the potential to be a stable money-making business, they began looking for locations to construct more theaters. A number of movie theaters were constructed one after another, and movies became a popular form of recreation among Bangkokians. The competition among all the movie theaters was acute. Advertising was done through

newspapers. Some advertisements went so far as to offer prizes to those who came to see the shows. For example, a theater owned by a Japanese offered the following prizes: (a) a sewing machine; (b) a bicycle; (c) an electric fan; and (d) two albums, one with Japanese postcards and the other one with pictures of pretty Japanese women. The holders of the tickets picked were given only three minutes to claim their prizes (Euengdin 1964a, 8).

During the early years of movies in Thailand, all of the movies shown were from France, Germany, Italy, or England. As the quality and quantity of United States movies improved, however, theater owners began ordering American movies, especially movies from Hollywood. The first thirty years of movies in Thailand were completely dominated by movies from the West. During this period, no movies were made locally.

The Silent Era

When the first feature film was made in Thailand in 1923 by Universal Studio, the entire cast was Thai. The name of the movie was Naang Sao Suwan (Suwanna of Siam). Henry McRay was the director. Originally, McRay was sent to Siam with his assistant, Gordon Sutherland, and his cameraman, Dale Clauson, to make a documentary about the country. However, after arriving in Siam, McRay was

impressed by the culture that was very much different from that in America and Europe. Plans were then changed to make a full-length feature instead. McRay contacted the Thai government for assistance. The Royal Department of Railroads helped find the actors and actresses. Actual shooting began in March 1922 and finished in June of the same year. The leading male actor was a government official in the Department of Fine Arts. He was a stage actor who had appeared in several plays written by His Majesty King Rama VI. In the movie, he played Krahan, a man with virtue who fell in love with Suwan. Sangeam Naveecharoen, the daughter of a nobleman, played Miss Suwanna. The premier of this movie was on July 22, 1923 (Sukvong 1990, 12).

According to Sukvong (1990) His Highness Burachat Chaiyakarn, His Majesty King Rama VI's brother who was also the commander-in-chief of the Royal Department of Railroads, had founded the Division of Motion Pictures one year earlier to distribute news from the department and make documentaries for the general public. This was the first team of filmmakers in the history of Thailand (Sukvong 1990, 10).

In 1927, four years after Universal Studio had shot a movie in Siam, a production company was formed by a group of men led by Luang Sanuephojchanaphak (Luang, a non-hereditary title, is no longer used). This was the first time that a group of Thais considered making movies. They called their

company the Krungthep (Bangkok) Movie Company. They advertised in the newspapers for the general public to come and audition for the roles, and began filming as soon as they could (Sukvong 1990, 16).

Less than one year before Krungthep Movie Company was formed, a group of individuals with Luang Sunthorn Asawarak as the leader, advertised in a newspaper for interested persons to audition for a new movie. They called their company the Thai Production Company. Although several individuals showed up for the audition, the movie was never made.

Krungthep Movie Company consisted mainly of the Vasuwat Brothers who, at that time, owned Sri Krung Publishing Company and Sri Krung newspaper. The key person was Poa Vasuwat who worked with the Division of Motion Pictures in the Royal Department of Railroads as chief cameraman. He and his three brothers had a very keen interest in moviemaking (Sukvong 1990, 16). They had extensive practice in movie production for four or five years before undertaking the production of a full-length feature film.

In July 1927, Krungthep Movie Company succeeded in producing the first Thai-made film, Choksongcharn (Double Luck). The leading male actor was Manob Prapharak, and the leading female actress was Sudjit Isarangkul, who came for the audition. She was a famous stage actress of the time.

Choksongcharn was shown to the public on July 30, 1927, and was a big success (Sukvong 1990, 18).

The Thai Production Company did not give up, however. They produced a movie called Mai Kid Lueu (Never Thought of It). The whole cast and crew was made up of co-workers in the company or their relatives. Mai Kid Lueu was first shown to the public on September 17, 1927 (Sukvong 1990, 19).

All the movies made during this period were silent films with title cards to describe the action. As more and more movies were made locally, some publishing companies began publishing the complete stories. One company, called Mr. T. Ngekchun, successfully published both Thai and foreign movie stories for several years. Their business became outdated when sound was added to the movies.

The Golden Age

The period from 1921, when the first reel of film was shot, until 1931 was called the silent era. Up to this point Sri Krung made silent movies with 35 mm film. Although small cameras that used 16 mm film were available, no one used them to shoot feature films.

In 1927, The Jazz Singer was made in the United States with a system called sound-on-disc. The sound was recorded on a disc and was played along with the movie. This process

was rather cumbersome. Later on, a new invention called sound-on-film was used. With this method, the sound was recorded directly on the film itself.

The Vasuwat brothers picked up the new invention right away. They collected textbooks on cinematography and learned from their American friends (Karanchanarkaphan 1975, 31). Near the end of 1929, a production team from Fox Movietone of America came to Thailand to make a documentary with sound. The Vasuwat brothers worked closely with them. They borrowed equipment from them and shot two Thai classical music masters in solo performances. This was the first film with sound made by Thai moviemakers. Afterward the Vasuwats concentrated on movies with sound and modified their old cameras so that they could record sound. The brothers continued experimenting and improving their sound recording system by studying from textbooks and learning from the Americans. Finally, they changed the name of their company to Sri Krung Soundfilm. They used their new cameras to shoot and record the return of His Majesty King Rama VII and the queen from the United States around the middle of 1931. In the same year, they made Long Thang (Going Astray), a Thai feature film with sound (Karnchanarkaphan 1975, 35). The first sound studio was constructed for this film.

Karnchanarkaphan (1975), one of the first crew members in the Sri Krung team, relates how the Vasuwats prepared for the first sound-on-film movie. First, they constructed a building with three rooms. The walls were lined with cellotex to hold the sound and prevent echoes. Each room was used as a set, one was the dining room, one was a bedroom, and one was the living room. These rooms could be adapted to accommodate other needs. Duties of the crew were divided as follow: Manit Vasuwat was the producer, Luang Kolkarnchenjit was the cameraman, Kasiel Vasuwat was the sound man, Krasae Vasuwat was the production secretary, Karnchanarkaphan was the director and scriptwriter, and Khun Sanitbanlengkarn provided the music. Maan Chalanukroe played the leading male, Sri played leading female, and Vassana Thongsri played the temptress (Karnchanarkaphan 1975, 37). The first movie made in Siam by the Americans established a characteristic that continued in typical Thai movies. The main characters in a cast were a hero, a heroine, a villain, and a temptress. The villain and the temptress were interchangeable; some movies had both and some had one or the other. Either way, they were indispensable. They not only continued the story, but they also served as a contrast to the virtuous hero and heroine. They were used to show the audience that virtue cannot be destroyed.

In 1934, the Vasuwat brothers began the construction of a permanent sound studio. It was a large concrete building which consisted of a sound-proof studio, a film processing room, a recording studio, an editing room, offices, and a residential building. Most of the equipment installed in this new studio building was either handmade or remodeled. The studio was the first complete sound studio in the country (Sukvong 1990, 26).

The Vasuwat brothers experimented with almost every new form of technology in filmmaking. Their first films were made using the single system which combined sound and pictures on the same strip of film. This system limited variations in shooting and editing. When the Vasuwat brothers heard that a new type of camera had been invented that could separate the sound and the picture, called the double system, they were eager to experiment with it. They soon realized that the new system provided them more freedom because the sound and picture could be put together in the laboratory. As a result of their efforts, they successfully adapted their old camera to accommodate the new double system. They also experimented with color. In one movie they used a special kind of film and developed it with a special chemical to create colors other than black and white. They used the new technique in only a few scenes of the movie because to make a whole movie with color would

cost twice as much as a black and white movie. Because of the expense, they put this idea on hold (Sukvong 1990, 27).

Sri Krung Soundfilm Company made several regular movies each year. The movies ranged from romantic comedy, to melodrama, to horror. The company also made one or two epic-like movies each year. The epic-like movies required greater investment, involved more personnel, and took more time to make (Sukvong 1990, 27).

This period was called the Golden Age because the moviemakers at Sri Krung Soundfilm Company were able to live up to their plans and expectations. They produced movies without any pressure from local audiences or the outside world. All the movies produced by Sri Krung each year were loaded with innovative ideas. The company's films were welcomed everywhere. From 1931 to 1941, the company produced many types of movies, including one which was shot on location in Italy. As a result, the first couple of stars in the history of Thai movies became well known--Jamrat Suvakorn and Manee Sumanat (Sukvong 1990, 28).

At the same time that Sri Krung Soundfilm Company was at its peak, another prominent film company was forming. It consisted of a group of young men who had earned degrees abroad. They called their company Thai Film, and produced about two movies a year. Like Sri Krung Soundfilm and other

minor film companies, Thai Film began to disintegrate when World War II began (Sukvong 1990, 29).

During this early period, when filmmakers in Thailand had just learned to make movies, their main concern was not the content of the films. The stories of the films were only a means for presenting the new technology to audiences in an interesting way. Although several movies during this period showed obvious traces of the influence of popular Hollywood movies at that time, audiences did not care much about the stories. They were primarily excited to see Thai actors and actresses on the screen and to hear them speak in Thai (Sukvong 1990, 29).

Dubbed movies were also introduced during this period. During the silent era, theaters provided movie programs which included synopses of the films shown. Later on, the story of each movie was published in the newspaper. Still later, publishing companies printed the stories in small booklets (Sukvong 1990, 31).

In 1928, Tuan Yawaprapart, who worked in one of the largest movie theaters in Bangkok, Pattanakorn, introduced an idea that he had noticed when he was in Japan. He believed that the use of a commentator such as Benshi (a commentator in Japanese stage plays and films) was a better idea than stories printed in booklets. In his first performance, he dressed up in classical Thai costume and sat

in front of the screen on the stage with a small lamp and a megaphone. During the movie, he read a dialogue and commentary which he had prepared, and attempted to make it match the pictures on the screen. He also provided the sound effects needed for the movie (Vetchanukroe 1992, 22)

Although the first performance did not turn out as Yawaprapart planned, his audiences were excited about it. As a result, Yawaprapart had to find an assistant to keep up with the demand. When he resigned, Sin Sriboonrueng, a cousin of the theater owner volunteered to take over the job. Sin Sriboonrueng became very popular because of his wit and sense of humor. When sound films were imported from foreign countries, it was Sin Sriboonrueng who began dubbing Thai over foreign languages (Sukvong 1990, 32).

The Second World War

The second World War, which began in Europe in 1939, caused a shortage of the film and chemicals used in making movies. Thailand was forced into the war soon after it began. The situation in Thailand was worsened in 1942 by the worst flood in Thai history in Bangkok. The flood, which caused major damage to Sri Krung's studio, forced the studio to close down in 1942. The most important change which resulted from the war and the shortage of film, was the increased popularity of 16 mm film, which was cheaper

and easier to obtain. The first commercial movie made on 16 mm film was Muang Thong (The Golden City), in 1943. Three years later Sam Poi Luang (The Three Temples) was made with 16 mm film in natural color and was dubbed in theaters. The fact that natural color films were new at that time contributed to the success of the movie. As a result, several filmmakers followed in the same direction (Sukvong 1990, 35).

Several filmmakers managed to make quite a few movies even while the war was still ravaging the country. Movie production completely stopped, however, during the last year of the war, when Bangkok was being heavily bombed day and night. Because no electricity was available, movie theaters were closed (Sukvong 1990, 36).

In spite of the hardships imposed by the war and developing technology, however, the period from 1932 until the end of World War II was a time when the movie business was at its height in popularity. Both sound-on-film and dubbed movies flourished during this period.

After the War

After World War II, very few movies were made using 35 mm film. Between 1946 and 1949, no movies were made with sound. The first movie after the war, which was widely welcomed by the public, was made using 16 mm film with

natural color and was dubbed live in the theater. The movie was Suphabhurutsuathai (The Thief). It was produced by Poramain Film Company and was shown to the public for the first time on June 28, 1949. It was a tremendous success and established the leading male as a movie star. Although Surasit Satayavong, who played the title role, became the nation's leading male actor, his role as a thief condemned him to this same type of character for almost half of his acting career. Moviegoers were unwilling to accept him in any other type of part (Sirikaya 1988, 90).

Most of the movies made during this period were action films because most producers thought that audiences preferred movies similar to Suphabhurutsuathai. A major criticism during this period was the lack of institutions to teach acting. Movie producers of the period had never studied movie production. Most had learned from their own experiences and from stage play (Sirikaya 1988, 92).

A noteworthy movie that was made during this period was Santi-Weena. It was produced by Ratt Pestonji, the founder of Hanumarn Movie Productions. The movie was made in 1954 and won three awards, for cinematography, art direction, and cultural promotion, at a film festival in Tokyo. Santi-Weena was made with 35 mm film with sound.

In Santi-Weena, Poonpun Angkarn played Santi, a man who encountered different forms of misfortune and

disappointment, but found comfort in his religion. Raevadees Sirivilai played Weena, a girl desired by two men. Pichai Phutiyote played Krai, a villain who was attracted to Weena and who tried to destroy Santi until the end. The movie was about love that does not end with a happy ending, which was not a common plot for movies of that period. The movie showed that tradition dictates how a person lives his or her life in society, and that the way out of problems is, ironically, to hold on to tradition. At the end of the movie the hero is ordained into monkhood. This can be considered the essence of Thai life in the rural areas of the period (Sirikaya 1988, 93).

Also during 1954, several filmmakers began to look back at their experiences and to acknowledge their problems. They realized that Thai movies would never die because moviegoers were willing to support this type of art. However, it was difficult for movies to be improved because several producers who struggled to survive in the business copied shamelessly from previously successful movies (Sirikaya 1988, 93). Several movies were made without any standard of quality. As a result, Thai movies declined in popularity, and theater owners were forced to enforce stricter regulations on locally made movies to avoid unnecessary financial risks.

By the end of this era, around 1955, 16 mm movies with natural color and dubbed sound were at their height. The revenue of Thai movies during this period was higher than the revenue of movies made in other countries in almost every theater in Bangkok.

Melodramatic and Leading Female Dominance

Between 1955 and 1956, the content of movies in general changed from action to melodrama, from blood to tears. This new trend was the result of the popularity of three female stars. Rattanaorn Intarakarmhaeng, Vilaiwan Wattanaphanit, and Amara Assawanont were the most popular leading females of the period. Most of the melodramas of this period were adapted from popular novels published in women's magazines, and most had similar story lines. The characteristics of good and bad in the heroes and villains were very clear cut. The stories were mostly aimed at eliciting empathy among the audience. A common story was of a poor, miserable heroine who learns in the end that she is the sole heir of a deceased billionaire grandfather. Stories about quarrels between mothers and daughters-in-law and about poor heroes who fall in love with the daughters of millionaires were also common. The period between 1955 and 1956 was the period of melodrama mixed with traditional Thai drama. Most of the actors and actresses during World War II were from

stage plays (Sirikaya 1988, 95). They brought along with them the acting techniques used on the stage, which were usually too exaggerated for the camera.

A new practice that began during this period was the shooting of movies abroad. Production teams were usually small, and team members helped each other as much as possible to save on expenses. For example, the director might also be the cameraman and work on the continuity. All the actors helped carry equipment to various locations as needed. Make-up artists were considered an unnecessary extra expense. Actors and actresses did their own make-up and took care of their own wardrobe. Producers often worked as set decorators with the help of the director.

The acceptance of Thai movies in foreign markets during this period was very limited. Most of the movies made were in 16 mm, which was below the international standard (Sirikaya 1988, 97).

One of the main complaints about Thai movies during this period--that they were in 16 mm and were silent--made it difficult to find markets abroad. A second complaint was that the standard of moviemaking was not at a satisfactory level. Neramit, a respectable director of the period, commented that most of the movie producers during this period were individuals who had money. These individuals tended to think that with enough money, they could do

anything, including make movies. They thought that because they invested their money in making movies, they had the right to be called film producers. In actuality, they caused the quality of movies to deteriorate because they did not know anything about producing movies, directing, or acting. They were also inept at distributing duties according to the potential of each crew member. Directors had to do almost everything, from writing the script to operating the camera to directing (Sirikaya 1988, 98).

A third complaint about Thai movies concerned a lack of support from the government. The government did not have clear-cut policies for assisting the film industry concerning tax on the film material imported to shoot movies or on the money needed to provide modern equipment. All of these problems were left for individual filmmakers to solve. Film producers during this period attempted to form a national organization which was aimed at making the government accept the movie business as a form of industry which deserved support (Sirikaya 1988, 107).

Mitre-Petchara Era

Dome Sukvong considered this period the Golden Age of Thai movies because it seemed that Thai moviemakers had found the formula for making popular movies. Movies became the country's most popular form of entertainment. This

period also produced an idol who was considered to be more than just an ordinary actor. Mitre Chaibancha, who was a semi-god to his fans, began his acting career in 1956. At the time of his untimely death on a set in 1970, he had made approximately three hundred movies. His success came not only from his complete devotion to his acting career, but also from his virtuous personal life, his pleasing personality, and his intense sex appeal. He was, to his audience, the symbol of virtue. He was the most popular leading male actor in the history of Thai movies. Nobody, dead or alive, has replaced him. From 1956 until 1970 when he died in the helicopter accident while shooting a stunt scene, it seemed as though Thai movies had only one leading male (Sukvong 1990, 37).

Between 1956 and 1960, Thai movies were harshly criticized for having the same actors and actresses in every movie. The style of acting also remained the same in movies made during this period. As a result of the criticism, producers began introducing new actors and actresses. One of the actresses discovered during this period was beauty queen Petchara Chaovaratt. Her first film was Pinchawee's Diary. She gained popularity in her later movies and became a leading female, playing against Mitre Chaibancha until he passed away. Later in her career, Petchara lost her eyesight. Both she and Mitre were victims of their careers

and the lack of insurance for actors. The reflection of reflectors which were used day and night for years slowly but permanently destroyed Petchara's eyesight. At the height of their careers, Mitre and Petchara were so highly in demand that they could not find time to rest. Mitre had only one day per month off. On the night of October 12th, 1970, Mitre finished a location shooting for one of several movies on which he was working. The morning of October 13th, at 5:00 a.m., he went to another location to shoot the last scene of Insri Thong (The Golden Eagle), the first film in which he directed and played the title role. Although very tired, he refused to use a stuntman to do a scene which included climbing a string ladder hanging from a helicopter. He did the stunt himself and fell from the ladder.

A weakness in the development of Thai movies was intensified in 1960 when movies which were locally made were charged higher taxes than movies imported from other countries. In the process of making a movie, producers had to pay taxes in different stages, whereas foreign films were taxed only for the master reels. As a result, an idea for increasing the import tax for foreign movies from 40 percent to 45 percent was made. In addition, a group of filmmakers with Ratt Pestonji as the leader asked the government to seriously consider helping the film business. Field Marshal Sarit Thanaratt, the Prime Minister, ordered the formation

of a committee to consider the suggestion. The first meeting was held on August 7, 1963, at the parliament. Nothing came out of the meeting; the committee only listened to the filmmakers problems. After Field Marshal Thanaratt died, Field Marshal Thanorm Kittikhajorn succeeded him as the new prime minister, and the subcommittee for the promotion of Thai movies submitted a letter to the government requesting the recognition of movies as an industry (Euengdin 1964a, 8).

The struggle of filmmakers mostly came from large production companies. Unfortunately, there were still a large number of amateur producers who thought that making movies was not difficult and could bring them a lot of money in a very short time. These producers were not concerned with the quality of the movies they made, and did not know anything about filmmaking. Some only looked for fame. Some preyed on young girls, who had dreams of being famous actresses, by presenting themselves as movie producers (Euengdin 1964b, 11). These were among the reasons that the government was reluctant to assist the movie industry. The amateur producers who took advantage of the movie business had no intention of remaining in the business permanently. Unfortunately, however, there were more amateur producers than serious professionals.

Two obvious problems between 1964 and 1965 were the lack of leading males and females and the shortage of new material. The only four actresses that the audience accepted during this period were Petchara Choawaratt, Pitsamai Vilaisak, Rattanaporn Intarakarmhaeng, and Metta Rungratt. The only three actors were Mitre Chaibancha, Chaiya Suriyan, and Sombat Methanee. These actors and actresses worked day and night on as many as fifty movies. Because of a shortage of actors and actresses, the system called cue was instigated. Each actor and actress, especially Mitre and Petchara, worked on several movies at the same time. In order for the system to work, actors and actresses had to allot their time each day for movies at several locations, which were sometimes several hundred miles apart (Sirikaya 1988).

The producers did not want to introduce new actors because theater owners were afraid that audiences would not accept them. Theater owners insisted that they had to know the leading male and female actors in a movie before they would consider showing it. As a result, theater owners and distributors played a very important role in the development of Thai audiences. They knew the tastes of audiences better than the producers (Sirikaya 1988, 110). The extent of their influence is discussed in detail later.

Most of the movies made during this period were silent and were in 16 mm. Dialogue had to be added in the theaters. The person who added music to the movies shown in a theater was called the music setter. A second person was used to create sound effects, such as doors opening and closing, gunshots, and so on. These requirements were eliminated when 16 mm film was replaced with 35 mm and sound was recorded on the film (Sirikaya 1988, 112).

The Mitre-Petchara era was the most important period in setting the standard of moviemaking in Thailand. The form and content of Thai movies were set according to the taste of audiences. Most modern critics claim that this period was one of the lowest points in the history of Thai films because almost every movie made during this time starred Mitre and Petchara. Their characters were the same in every movie--good-hearted, virtuous, and heroic heroes and heroines. Critics also claim that the movies had almost the same story line--the typical boy-meets-girl or tear-jerking melodrama. What made movies in this period interesting, however, is that there was no attempt to duplicate Hollywood movies in either subject matter or production. Mitre and Petchara were the first pair of true superstars in the history of Thai films. Together they made almost three hundred movies in a period of nine years. During that time

they completely dominated the silver screen (Sukvong 1990, 40).

This was also the period in which filming technique and story presentation were passed down from one generation to the next, to form a formula within itself. Every film was expected to contain a range of tear-jerking incidents, mystery, or gun fights, romance, comic relief, and sexual encounters, and to have a happy ending (Sukvong 1990, 41).

The Change (1970 to 1976)

The period from 1970 to 1976 was the turning point that led to a new era of movies in Thailand. New directors entered the scene who dared to make movies that were different from the ones made before. Coupled with the political situation in the country, which was confined for a long period of time, Thai movies began to break away from the old style. The most influential director during this period was Somboonsuk Niyomsiri (professionally called Piek Poster) (Sirikaya 1988, 120).

Thai movies were brought into this period by two movies that marked a deviation from existing trends. The two movies were Tone, directed by Niyomsiri and Monrak Lukthung (The Country Romance), directed by Rungsri Tassanaphayak.

Tone was directed by Niyomsiri, a first-class poster painter-turned-director. As an artist, Niyomsiri

incorporated art into his movies. The story of Tone shockingly defied popular trends. In every movie before Tone, one dominant characteristic of a heroine was that she was always a virgin. No matter what kind of situation she found herself in, she was expected to be able to extricate herself and to maintain her virginity. The rape of the heroine in Tone was a complete shock to audiences. It marked a major change in the practice of stereotyping certain characters, especially major characters. Most important of all, it attracted the attention of the educated people who had turned their backs on Thai movies. Because of Tone, this group of moviegoers who had watched only foreign movies (especially from Hollywood), began to notice a change in Thai movies.

In an interview, Niyomsiri discussed the reason he decided to make Tone. He explained that he had painted a lot of movie posters but that he was not satisfied with Thai movies made during that time. He brought up the idea of making a movie to his friend who was an owner of two popular star magazines, but who hardly knew anything about moviemaking. The friend, Chuanchai Thechasrisuthee agreed to finance the production. Niyomsiri confessed that he did not watch a lot of Thai movies. He preferred to watch foreign movies, especially those imported from the United States. As a result, Tone shows a lot of influences of the

Hollywood movies. In Tone he used editing extensively for the first time. Rather than cutting just when there was nothing else to show or to tell in a shot, Niyomsiri used editing as a part of the story telling, and to keep the pace of the movie at a reasonable speed. As a poster painter, he had the advantage of experience at telling a story with pictures. He used this talent to its fullest extent in Tone (Niyomsiri 1992). In movies before Tone, light was set brightly on every spot. This was so that wherever an actor was he could be clearly seen. Niyomsiri added shadow into the lighting technique. He created the illusion of reality, and replaced the plain flat look with light and shadow to add an artistic look to each scene and to make the surroundings more realistic.

Another factor that contributed to the breakthrough of Tone was a producer who knew nothing about moviemaking. Chuanchai Thechasrisuthee provided Niyomsiri with 1.5 million baht, and gave him a free hand in making the movie. This was completely different from the common practice of that time. Usually, the person who financed a movie made decisions on important details such as the choice of actors and actresses, the story, how the story developed, and how long it should take to finish the whole process of shooting. Tone was Poster's creation in every aspect. Because it was the creation of a true artist without interference from the

business side of moviemaking, Tone became a landmark in the history of Thai movies (Niyomsiri 1992).

Another interesting aspect of Tone was that the story line did not deviate much from the mainstream movies of the period. In Tone the leading male character was a poor boy from the country who had come to Bangkok to attend college. He falls in love with the daughter of a rich man. She looks down upon him. Poster explained that in order to lower her to his level, she was raped, which is a form of disgrace to most Thai women. Also, to elevate him to her level, Tone graduates and gets a good job. When she is raped, Tone offers her comfort and shows how much he still admires her (Niyomsiri 1992).

The second movie that marked the transition into a new era was Monrak Lukthung (The Country Romance). Its success was based on the fact that it incorporated the formula of 16 mm movies. Mitre and Petchara starred in it. It also contained the popular folk music which had captivated the country people of that time (Sukvong 1982, 46). However, Monrak Lukthung, like Tone, was filmed in 35 mm. The two movies made producers realize that the period of 16 mm was over and that it was time to return to 35 mm with sound-on-film. The preferences of audiences had changed to larger screens and more realistic sound.

The last, but not least important, factor which contributed to the change in the film industry was the unexpected accident which resulted in the death of Mitre Chaibancha. His sudden death was the last straw for dubbed 16 mm movies. Several movies that had Mitre in them were still in production and had to be cancelled. Since then, one-by-one, Thai producers have turned to 35 mm. Since 1972, no movies have been filmed in 16 mm (Sukvong 1982, 48).

From their introduction until the mid-1970s, Thai movies were free from criticism. Everyone seemed to be satisfied with what they saw on the screen. The art of filmmaking, up to this point, was passed down from one generation to the next by means of observation and hands-on training. From the 1970s on, more and more filmmakers received formal education in the West, especially the United States. As a result, they gradually began to reject the old form of moviemaking. The new generation of moviemakers called the old generation of filmmakers ignorant and said that they did not know anything about making movies (Bangsaparn 1984b, 136).

Dawn of a New Era

Between 1971 and 1972, movie producers bought an increasing number of popular novels. Another strategy used

was to pay radio production companies to turn novels that moviemakers wanted to produce into radio plays first. This technique did not reduce the movie audience because listeners knew the stories from the beginning to the end, they still went to the movies to see their favorite movie stars (Sirikaya 1988, 13).

During this period, a young and talented director came onto the scene. Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol was a graduate of the University of California at Los Angeles and the son of Prince Phanuparn Yukol, who was also a filmmaker. His first attempt at directing, Man Ma Khap Kuam Mued (It Comes with Darkness), was a science fiction movie and was a failure. His second attempt was based on an award winning novel called Kao Chue Karn (His Name is Karn). The story was about a young and idealistic physician who went to the country to serve the poor. The movie ended with the breaking up of his family and his death, which was not a familiar ending for movies during that period. Prince Chatrichalerm both produced and directed this film. The actor who played doctor Karn was Sorapong Chatri, who later became a superstar (Sirikaya 1988, 14).

Although only a few of the movies made in 1972 made money, it was the year that new filmmakers tried to raise the quality of movies and to pay more attention to details. Niyomisiri and Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol are frequently

used as examples of this new meticulousness (Sirikaya 1988, 132). Niyomsiri's third movie, which was made in 1972, was Chu (The Lover). Again, he challenged the popular trend. There were only three characters in the movie--the rest were extras. There was no real hero, heroine, or villain. Each character was the victim of his or her own fate and desires. The story was very simple. A man saves a woman's life from drowning in a ship wreck, and she becomes his wife. They live together on a small island far away from civilization. When he becomes ill, she meets another man and has an affair. The main idea of the film is the psychological study of humans, which is very rare in Thai movies. The three actors, Manob Assawathep, Krung Srivilai, and Wandee Srithrang, gave their best performances. Although Krung Srivilai later became a superstar, none of his later films match his performance in Chu. Wandee Srithrang's life was cut short when she was murdered, presumably by a hit man hired by her powerful husband. Manob Asswathep appeared from time to time in later films. Although he retired from his acting career, his place in the film world is indisputable. Chu is one of the best movies ever made in Thailand. Its simple plot gave way to concentration on other details such as a character's development and motivation. The story required location shooting, which saved a lot of money. Financial considerations are

important in typical film production in Thailand, where budgets are often very limited.

The success of Niyomisiri's movies created a new division between moviegoers who chose the movies that they thought were good enough to be watched, and those who watched anything, regardless of its quality. Before Niyomsiri began making movies, the first group watched only foreign movies and looked down upon locally made movies. The second group continued to hold on to the old idea that movies were merely for entertainment. These moviegoers felt no need for choosing the movies they saw (Sirikaya 1988, 135).

Seventy-five movies were made in 1972. Most of them had to wait to be shown at theaters that had to clear their time slots which were mostly packed with foreign movies. Very few theaters showed Thai movies; therefore, competition was very high. Sombat Methanee was the most popular actor. The type of movie popular among the audience was comedy (Sirikaya 1988, 136).

The year 1973 was one of tension between college students and the government. Students, who asked for true democracy attempted to topple prime minister Thanom Kittikhajorn and his government. The attempt was a success, but at the expense of several lives. A change that appeared in Thai movies around the time of this incident was that

heros and heroines were either college students or college graduates. Earlier movies had hardly mentioned anything concerning the characters' educational credentials. This was the first time that movies had incorporated the social life of characters with their private lives. The result was a more realistic portrayal of characters. Most Thai movies presented only the personal life of characters. Characters' jobs were sometimes mentioned, but nothing more (Sirikaya 1988).

The early 1970s was a period in which Thai people truly enjoyed democracy. Their enjoyment was reflected in movies, which also began to show problems in the society and ways to solve them. Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol's movie Theptida Longlaam (The Motel Angel) reflected the perceptions and questions that most people had about prostitution (Sirikaya 1988, 137).

The old style movies were still made as well, however. The best representative of this school was Banchong Kanyamarn (professionally called Dokdin). Most of his movies made during that period of time were successful. As a director he made movies that appealed to the tastes of audiences. He strongly supported the old form of performing arts. It was, for him, a guarantee that audiences would accept his movies. In all of his films, the exact same characteristics were present. First of all, each movie had

everything from romance to revenge to comic relief to fist or gunfights. Second, actors and actresses were considered the most important factor in a movie. They were type-cast and had to maintain a clear-cut set of characteristics. The hero, the heroine, the villain, and the temptress, all had to be portrayed as such. For example, in one of his films that had one hero and two heroines, the hero was in love with one heroine, but at the end of the movie fell for the other one. Kanyamarn could not have the first heroine turn to any other male character in the movie because, as one of the heroines, she was only equal to the hero. This example shows how Kanyamarn, as a director, considered the stars more important than the plot or the realistic portrayal of the situation. In addition, the major characters were always well dressed. The outer appearance of a hero or heroine had to reflect his or her inner spirit as well as the image of a movie star, both on and off the screen. Moviegoers perceived movie stars as persons who thrived in a glamorous world. The characters portrayed in a movie were less important than maintaining their image (Sirikaya 1988, 139).

Because film production involves large sums of money, a slight mistake can mean disaster. Therefore, it is not easy for investors in the movie business to take unnecessary chances. Even though the success of one movie could not

guarantee the success of the next one, producers of this period often attempted to reduce their risk by duplicating the styles of successful movies. The titles of Kanyamarn's movies always consisted of two syllables, such as Nok Noi (The Tiny Bird) or Maow Meow (The Pussy Cat), and usually were the names of the heroines (Sirikaya 1988, 139).

The most outstanding movie of this period, according to most critics, was Kao Chue Karn (His Name is Karn). This movie had good form and content, and the cast portrayed the characters very realistically. The shooting process and editing were also very bold. Prince Chatrichalerm dared to use editing techniques to answer the questions posed in the preceding shots. For example, when a character asked Dr. Karn his name, the scene was cut to the next shot of a military captain calling Dr. Karn by his first name to go and have a drink with him. Chatrichalerm also dared to use symbols, which was rare in Thai movies. Kao Chue Karn was made to satisfy those who chose the movies they wanted to watch. Chu was also widely praised in terms of its breaking away from the old, repetitious form of movies (Sirikaya 1988, 140).

Movies made in 1974 were even more realistic. Prince Chatrichalerm made Theptida Longlaam (The Motel Angle), which was a story about Malee, a prostitute, who used a motel for her business. Her story is told from the day she

was enticed into selling her body. With this movie, Prince Chatrichalerm broke all the rules which dictated that the heroine had to be a virgin from the beginning until the end of the story. In this movie, the heroine was a prostitute. The hero was a pimp instead of a tough guy who carried himself with pride and dignity. The film was not made to offer entertainment so much as to call attention to a serious problem in the society (Sirikaya 1988, 147).

In another important movie made in 1974, Mai Mee Sawan Saamrub Khun (There is No Heaven for You), the choices of actors and actresses were different from most Thai movies. The leading female did not actually meet the standard of beauty for a typical heroine in a Thai movie. She was chosen more because of her talent as an actress. Her name was Pattaravadee Sritriratt, and she later advanced her acting career by studying acting at Pasadena Playhouse in California. In this first movie she played a wealthy old maid who was hurt again and again by men. The story line was about the problems of love and family. Every detail was meticulously laid out. The movie began by slowly exposing the background of the main character, and led to an unexpected turning point. The movie began with a slow pace, then speeded up to the climax, which led to an abrupt end. This type of story development was not common in Thai movies during that time. Typical story telling of the period used

the same pace from beginning to end. In other words, the technique of how a story was told was not as important as the content of the story itself. The ending also traps the audience in a feeling of empathy, and leaves a question unanswered. Is a person wicked by nature, or is it the environment that shapes that kind of personality? Normally, the end of typical Thai movies made during that period did not leave anything unclosed at the end. Typical Thai movies did not leave anything for audiences to think about after they left the theater. Every movie had to confirm the original idea concerning social values before the story came to a complete end. Although this movie was not a complete breakthrough, as was Chu, in terms of presenting a whole story circling around only a few characters or sarcastically criticizing the society, as did Kao Chue Karn, it was a typical drama which presented the lifestyle of a middle-class woman. What made the movie stand out among other films was the director's meticulousness and the excellent cast.

In 1975, filmmakers continued to experiment and to search for direction. As a result, they sometimes went too far. Several filmmakers tried to establish social criticism as a popular trend. Unfortunately, they did not take into consideration the fact that movies were still a form of entertainment and, to a certain extent, had to conform to

the traditions of performing arts in Thai society. Complete departure from traditions was impossible, especially in movies which required large sums of money. The success of movies does not depend on what they can offer to society, but on whether anyone is willing to pay to watch them (Sirikaya 1988, 150).

Although filmmakers' attempts to push movies into new forms sometimes led to success, they sometimes led to total failure. During this period, movies developed from incidents that occurred in families to love and sex. The development of story lines, in most cases, was unreasonable and unrealistic, and was not consistent with the true conditions of Thai society. This was a period of learning--it was not uncommon to find movies copied directly from foreign movies. This was a period of freedom--everyone seemed to be able to voice their opinions freely. Movie-makers employed their new-found freedom to the extreme, especially in sexual exposure on the screen. Movies made during this period were filled with suggestive sex scenes.

In 1974, Niyomsiri made Wai Ollawon (The Chaotic Age), which was the biggest success of the year. Niyomsiri took great care with every detail throughout the story. The dialogue was sharp and witty, and nothing deviated from the realities of everyday life. Again, however, Niyomsiri deviated from traditional Thai movies. Niyomsiri derived

the story from the real life story of his niece when she was a teenager. It was about a boy from the country who came to Bangkok to pursue his dream of being successful in life. He passed the entrance examination which was very competitive to study in a university, but his mother could not support him. He had to work at odd jobs that were considered by most people to be low class jobs, such as construction and house painting. He fell in love with a girl whose father was very strict. Niyomsiri explained that he was fascinated by this story because it reminded him of his own life and the hard work necessary to pay his way through the Fine Arts College. Niyomsiri took a major risk in casting the two new actors. They had no acting experience and were very different from the typical male and female leads. Pairoj was dark and skinny (fair skin color is considered more attractive by Thais than dark skin). Lalana was dark, fat, and short. Although Niyomsiri had to beg distributors to buy the movie, the revenue Wai Ollawon generated from the theaters was fifteen times more than the distributors had paid for it. Pairoj and Lalana became teen idols almost overnight. When asked to what he attributed the movie's success, Niyomsiri (1992) said the story attracted teenagers who hungered for movies to which they could relate.

The period between 1970 and 1971 was the transition period of Thai movies. It paved the way for the next era.

Leaders were Somboonsuk Niyomsiri and Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, who presented movies which deviated from the traditional style of Thai movies. They proved that movies could be realistic and entertaining at the same time. It was also a time of searching and experimenting for filmmakers who tried to raise the standard of Thai movies to an acceptable level in the international film market. By the end of 1976, Thai moviemakers were at a point of distinctively changing the image of Thai movies. Nevertheless, some directors held tightly onto the old style. As seen in all of Kanyamarn's movies, this kind of movie still made money. Still another group of filmmakers attempted to incorporate the traditional style with new trends. The best director in this group was Chana Kraprayoon, a young and brilliant director who received his formal education in film production in the United States. His contribution to the film art in Thailand is discussed in detail in a later section (Sirikaya 1988, 153).

On October 14, 1973, a large demonstration in Bangkok brought about bloodshed and the victory of the people in their demand for true democracy. The country welcomed freedom of speech for the first time in decades. Thai movies were also affected by this change. Moviemakers tried to pull away from the old way of making movies (Sirikaya 1988, 159).

New Direction (1977 to 1982)

Thai movies evolved from the form and content of stage plays to an art form with specific characteristics of its own. The characteristics of movies were challenged by changes in society, especially in the city of Bangkok. The people who lived in Bangkok wanted to see movies that they could relate to. They wanted realistic stories that were similar to those encountered in everyday living. At the same time, the majority of the people who lived in other parts of the country still preferred the old style of movies. As a result, some directors continued to make them (Sirikaya 1988, 160).

During this period, government officials increased the tax per metre of imported film by 1,400 percent. Government officials recognized the potential revenues to be made from film, noting that in 1974, \$26.95 million of the United States \$81.8 million in gross receipts was paid in taxes. The government officials also realized that 85 percent of the total screen time was in the hands of trans-national corporations, and that an average of \$25 million a year in royalties and profits was sent out of Thailand by foreign film distributors and television networks (Lent 1990, 216).

The fourteen-fold tax increase had immediate effects; Chinese film exhibition was temporarily dried up, and the number of overall imports was cut by about a third. Within

a year, Chinese films recaptured part of the market by bringing in movies in negative rather than positive form, which was a less expensive process. The tax also stimulated local productions (from 80 in 1975 to 140 a year later), made Thai films the top grossing films in the country by early 1978, and encouraged more Thai filmmakers to use foreign locations. What it did not do, however, was spur producers into making better quality films (Lent 1990, 216-217).

A shortage of films for theaters between 1977 and 1982 caused several changes in the film industry. The more than 600 theaters all over the country had to accept Thai movies in order to keep their theaters in business. Of the 36 theaters in Bangkok, the number showing Thai movies increased from 4 to 12. The special fees that producers had paid theaters to show their movies were no longer necessary. Some movies became incredibly successful and made large profits. Others, if they were not very badly made, generated decent revenues for producers. Thus, the film industry prospered profusely (Sirikaya 1988, 161).

Theater owners, who previously had not cared about film producers, became dependent upon them for movies. Theater owners, however, found their way out of the situation by opening their own production companies. For the first time, theater owners became producers as well. They made up a

third group of producers. The existing two groups included popular filmmakers who were already well established in the industry such as Niyomsiri and Vijit Khunavutt, and filmmakers who got in and out of the business because they thought making movies was an easy way to make large amounts of money within a short period of time (Sirikaya 1988, 161).

Three of the major production companies that were started by theater owners or film distributors were Apex, Sahamongkol Films, and Five Star Productions. Apex was a branch of Pyramid Entertainment, which owned several first class theaters in Bangkok. Pyramid also imported movies from major production companies such as Columbia, Fox, Paramount, and Walt Disney. Sahamongkol Films began by importing foreign movies, especially from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Sahamongkol owned only a few movie theaters and sold movies to other companies.

Five Star Productions was originally a movie distributing company, and did not own any theaters. However, it had a contract with several theaters. The year 1977 was the best year for Five Star because it produced several good movies and signed contracts with many good directors, such as Niyomsiri. In 1978, Five Star Productions signed contracts with Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, Yutthana Mukdasanit, and Kid Suwannasorn.

Several movies made during 1977 reflected the old style of moviemaking. One director, however, succeeded in incorporating the old style with new trends, which provided a more realistic portrayal of events and characters. Chana Kraprayoon made Oh! Mada, which exposed the confusing life in a family. It was the story of Mada, who, as a mother, dictated every aspect in the lives in her family members. The story revolved around the problems within a family that was very typically Thai. The role of Mada was realistic, however, and could be found in many Thai families (Sirikaya 1988, 48).

Two movies made in 1977 that were both successful and widely praised deviated from traditional Thai movies. Prae Kao (The Old Scar), which was directed and produced by Cherd Songsri, was a love story of Kuan and Ream and reflected the lives of Thais who lived along a river on the outskirts of Bangkok seventy years ago (Sirikaya 1988, 48).

Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol got the idea for Thongpoon Kokpho Rassadorn Them Karn (Thongpoor Kokpho, A First-Class Citizen) from The Bicycle Thief. His movies reflected the harsh reality of life in a big city such as Bangkok, where the poor have no rights and no opportunities. Thongpoon, the leading character, came to Bangkok with his son from the country with the hope that he would be able to make enough money to send his son to school. He saved all the money he

made to buy a taxi of his own. One day his taxi was stolen. He was evicted from his rented house because he did not have enough money to pay the rent. Thongpoon and his son wandered all over the city looking for his taxi. This movie reflects the characteristics of people in a big city without restraints. Part of the success of this movie was attributable to the fact that the story was about a poor man from the country. It attracted audiences outside Bangkok. Another part was that the story was set in Bangkok and was a very realistic portrayal of life in Bangkok. This part attracted audiences in Bangkok (Sirikaya 1988, 49).

This same year (1977) Chana Kraprayoon made Mae Luak Kerd Dai (If Only I could Choose), the story of Baiporn, a young girl from the country who was lured to Bangkok to be a prostitute. The story showed life in a brothel and the individuals who came to visit it. In this movie, Chana was highly praised for his use of pictures to tell the story. This was one of his masterpieces.

During the period between 1977 and 1982, Thai movies moved from the traditional trend to a progressive style. Progressive style movies aim at the realistic portrayal of events, and everything that happens (in the movies) has a reason. Niyomsiri and Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol were pioneers of this new style. In the early days of movies, several filmmakers were influenced by watching many American

movies. Early Thai movies were more or less direct copies of American movies. Very few early directors had any formal education in film production. As a result, the movies were superficial, cheap duplications. Although duplication is a form of study at a very basic level, duplicators need to adapt and adjust their work to later periods and to make their work suitable to the current conditions of society (Sirikaya 1988, 185). During this period, duplication was upgraded to a more sophisticated level. Life in Thai society was portrayed as it really was. However, the traces of Hollywood's influence were still strong. The ultimate goal of Thai filmmakers should be the highest level of duplication, at which no trace of Western influence is detectable. The term duplication is used because all theory and style in filmmaking are products of the West. This influence is impossible to avoid. The best that can be expected is to use Western theories as a starting point and to find a style which follows the way of life of the society a filmmaker lives in. Later on in this study, an attempt is made to determine whether this is possible in Thai movies.

Teens' Dominance (1983 to the Present)

Wai Ollawon was the first Thai movie that was truly for teenagers. In the movie Tone, made by the same director, the hero and heroines were college students. The movie did

not explore their roles or needs as a part of the society in which they lived. The hero and heroine in Wai Ollawon were in their teens and early twenties, and were in school. The main interest of the story was based on the pair's struggle to be accepted by society and to be successful.

After Wai Ollawon, movies about teenagers were made sporadically. However, their impact was not fully realized until recently. With the popularity of video cassette players and the improvement of the quality of television programs, coupled with the economic problems and heavy traffic of Bangkok, most adults prefer to stay at home and watch television or videos. Going to see movies is no longer a form of family entertainment. Instead, teenagers have become the targeted audience of filmmakers. According to Santi Swetvimol, a film critic, the Thai movie audience is no longer made up of farmers and people living in the country. Today's audiences are teenagers, students, educators, and office workers. These moviegoers, who have a certain level of knowledge, choose to watch movies that satisfy their personal interests (Thasanabanchong 1991, 7). The average Thai moviegoer is between 10 and 25 years of age. Teenagers have time to go to see movies, and even though they do not have to work, they are given money by their parents. Their social activities are outside of their homes, with friends. Movie theaters are the most comfort-

able and cheapest place for them to socialize. For this reason, the movies that make money today are those that are about adolescents and for adolescents.

Many popular Thai movies for teens have similar story lines. The stories involve the lives of young people as students or as new graduates who are beginning new careers or getting married. One of the most successful of this type of movie is Boonchu. The originator of the five-part series, Bundit Ritthakol, has been established as a major director by the tremendous success of the Boonchu movie series. The first two Boonchu movies concern high school students' most challenging examination of their lives, the entrance examination. This examination determines whether or not Thai students can continue their education in one of the six most prestigious public universities.

One of the reasons that Boonchu movies are so successful is that, in Bangkok, and in every other province of Thailand, audiences can relate to the character of Boonchu, who represents the search of the people in the big city for kindness, honesty, and sincerity (Thasanabanchong 1991, 107-108). Cheeraboonya Thasanabanchong observes that teenagers go to movies to meet friends who share their thoughts, their feelings, and their fears.

The structure of most teen movies is identical. The stories open by setting the goal for the hero or heroine.

This goal leads to a series of problems that must be solved. Love is always a major problem. There are three types of problems which originate from love. In the first one, the hero courts the heroine and has to conquer several obstacles before he wins her heart at the end. In the second type, there is conflict between the hero and the heroine at the beginning of the movie, but a variety of incidents bring them together or force them to help each other until the animosity turns into love and understanding. In the last type, the hero and heroine are in love, but because of a variety of incidents, they misunderstand each other. In the end, they usually find the love they long for. Although the stories do not necessarily end in marriage every time, the characters always try to find the kind of love they are looking for, even though they sometimes have to compete with each other. The bond between friends, however, is always portrayed as strong and unbreakable (Thasanabanchong 1991, 109).

One indispensable characteristic of Thai teen movies is the comic relief which is inserted in every possible place throughout the stories. The movies also must have a happy ending. At the end, it is imperative that the characters find a way to conquer all the obstacles and reach their goals.

Somdej Santipracha (1992), a director and business consultant for Five Star Productions, explains how the idea for each film for teenagers is formulated. Someone comes up with the title of the movie first. Because teenagers pride themselves in using and creating all kinds of slang which adults do not understand, the title is often informal, such as Boonchu Phu Narak (Boonchu, the Cute One), or slang, such as Chalui (which means smoothly). The stranger the title, the more it attracts teenagers' attention. Next, a team of scripters (called scripters rather than scriptwriters because they are not a team of true scriptwriters in the traditional sense of the word) conjure the gags and funny incidents which will be put together. The story is loosely written to present the gags and incidents. The scripters try to create as many gags as possible for the finished script. The plot is not the primary interest because most stories are almost identical. Santipracha believes that teenagers go to see movies to laugh and have a good time. They do not really care much about the story (Santipracha 1992).

The characters in teen movies represent the characteristics of a majority of Thai teenagers. The characters are realistic and have flaws like everyone in real life. The hero and heroine are normally teens, and the heroines are usually from a higher social status than the heroes. The

supporting characters in a film are either friends or relatives. Most have the same social status as the leading characters.

The current period can be compared to the Mitre-Petchara era. While the style has deviated completely from the traditional trend, it has its own look and form. The story lines in most films are basically the same. Although the target audiences of the two eras are different, the two periods have one fact in common. As Somdej Santipracha remarks, the fear that movies will not make money is no longer a problem, for the present. Every film made for teenagers is popular. Producers do not have to worry whether or not distributors will buy their movies. They have regained their power back from the distributors, who used to dictate who would be the leading males or females and how the movies would end (Santipracha 1992).

CHAPTER III

THE STRUCTURE OF THAI SOCIETY AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THAI PEOPLE: THEIR INFLUENCE ON SHAPING THE TASTE OF THAI MOVIE AUDIENCES

Thailand, which is located in Southeast Asia, has a population of 55 million people who live in 500,000 square kilometers. Nine million Thais live in Bangkok. Compared to other countries in the world, Thai society has, for many centuries, been a peaceful one. Unlike other countries in Asia, Thailand has never been colonized by any country in the West. Moreover, Thailand has always successfully maintained peace and integrity in its socioeconomic and political environment.

Typhoons have made the soil along the Chao Phraya River very fertile. In the past, Thailand was an agricultural country, and the Thai people, who were happy and content with their lives, had modest needs for materialistic possessions. Most Thais lived in small villages which made it difficult to maintain communication with the outside world. Therefore, the chances for Thais to learn about new technology and new ideas from the outside world were limited. Because their lives were confined within their

villages, they were very isolated. The religion which was passed down from the ruling class taught them to live in peace and to believe in karma, which emphasized the idea that the poverty and injustices faced by the people were a result of wrong doing in past lives. This prevented them from believing that the ruling class put them in their situation (Kruekaew 1972, 4).

The influx of modern technology and the influence of Western culture since World War II have made Western lifestyles a pattern for Thai people, especially those in larger cities such as Bangkok, which is the gateway for Western influence. Western influence came to Thailand through industrialization, the media, and educated elites who received their education abroad. As a result of this exposure to Western cultures, the new generation of Thai people feels the need for the comfortable lifestyles brought about by materialistic belongings and money. In addition, the morals of Thais have begun to deteriorate. Rapid increases in the population have created greater need for food, clothing, and shelter (Kruekaew 1972, 5). The once self-sufficient Thai society has turned into a codependent one. Almost every province depends more on Bangkok than vice versa. Bangkok has become the center of everything.

Thai Social Stratification

Social stratification plays a very important role in Thai society. This practice was particularly prominent during the period of absolute monarchy, which was before the peaceful revolution in 1932. To understand how Thai society functions, it is imperative to consider social stratification. Thailand has had three types of social classifications: caste, estate, and class. The caste system was derived from the belief that humans are not equal even before they are born, that whatever caste they are born into is predetermined from heaven. Individuals remain in their caste for their entire lifetimes. Their rights and duties are determined by their caste. There is no mobility in the caste system, which means a person cannot move up or down between different castes. Individuals must marry only a person of their caste (Kruekaew 1972, 109).

The estate system is the social system practiced during the period of the monarchy. This system depends on the amount of land a person owns. Each person has rights and duties according to class. The difference between the estate system and the caste system is that in the estate system, a person can move up and down between classes. Although this moving between classes is not common, it is possible.

The last type of social classification is the class system. This system uses the economy to classify individuals in society. Individuals in a society can be classified by their wealth, education, behavior, or taste.

The social stratification system originated in India where several tribes of people were ruled by several kings and sultans. The major religion in India is Hinduism which emphasized that what a person was in this life was the result of his or her actions or wrongdoings in a past life. If the person was poor, it was because he or she had sinned in a past life. There was nothing a person could do to change it. Individuals had to be satisfied with what they were and had to live accordingly. The ruling class found this belief very convenient and useful to keep their people under their control. Because if everyone was satisfied with his or her place in the society, the kings did not have to worry if anyone would question his or her right to power.

Thai society was very receptive to this system. The major religion in Thailand is Buddhism, which is very much influenced by Hinduism. Buddhism also teaches karma, which is basically the same as Hindu's belief in reincarnation. This system first appeared in the country during the period of time when the country had to fight with every other country surrounding it. The kings had to find a way to completely control their subjects in order to be able to

concentrate on wars with outside enemies. This system provided the ideal solution to the problem.

The current social stratification in Thai society is a mixture of all three types of classification. For example, some families believe that they can marry only within families of the same social status, occupation, or wealth. The main factors used in classifying social stratification are prestige and social stratus (Kruekaew 1972, 110).

Factors used in determining social stratification are (a) family, (b) success in the bureaucracy, (c) economical and political power, (d) personal wealth, (e) education, and (f) occupation. The prestige or social status of a person in Thai society is determined by a combination of several factors. For example, a person with a high level of education usually has a good job, good pay, and is successful in society (Kruekaew 1972, 115-116).

Major Thai Values

The major Thai values, as summarized by Suphattra Suphab (1977), are (a) respect for the king, (b) belief in Buddhism, (c) respect for money, (d) respect for persons with power, (e) respect for elders, (f) a strong sense of gratitude, (g) respect for knowledgeable persons, (h) generosity and hospitality, (i) independence, (j) disregard for time, (k) a ready smile, (l) materialism,

(m) unadventurousness and intolerance, (n) an affinity for gambling, (o) a passive nature, (p) a love for fun, (q) a dislike for discipline, (r) superstitions, (s) belief in the extended family system, and (t) politeness and primness.

Respect for the King

The present king is the symbol of virtue. He is the figure of respect and love that holds the country together against threats from every direction. Most Thai people say that they are willing to die for the king.

Belief in Buddhism

Most Thai people are Buddhists. However, people in the city practice their religious belief less frequently than do Thais who live in the country.

Respect for Money

In the old days, prestige was more important than anything else. Unfortunately, in everyday society, money and other forms of materialistic belongings are now more important. People equate money to prestige. The virtue of an individual depends on how much money a person has. Several Thai movies reflect the decadence of modern society in which money is placed higher than moral values.

Respect for Persons with Power

This is a common practice in a bureaucratic society. Power depends upon position and rank. The higher the rank or position, the more power a person has.

Respect for Elders

Children in Thailand are taught from a very young age to respect their elders, starting with their parents, older brothers and sisters, older relatives, teachers, and everyone who has a higher position in the workplace.

A Strong Sense of Gratitude

This value has always been taught to children from a very young age. There are several ceremonies that the Thai people practice to show their gratitude to persons who help shape their lives, such as parents and teachers.

Respect for Knowledgeable Persons

Knowledgeable persons, in this sense, means individuals who have degrees of some sort. In almost all of Thai literature there is praise for pundits. In real life, Thais, as well as most Asians, believe that all knowledge and modern technology comes from the West. Therefore, they look at persons with blond or brown hair and blue eyes with admiration and respect. This is also an explanation for why

some Thai filmmakers believe that movies must be made Western style and no other way.

Generosity and Hospitality

These characteristics are more obvious in the country than in large cities such as Bangkok. Hosts treat visitors with beverages, sweets, or even complete meals to make sure that they do not leave with an empty stomach. At the same time, the visitors never come to visit a friend or relative with an empty hand. Visitors always bring presents for their hosts. Another example of the generosity of Thai people living in the country is the custom of putting a jar of drinking water in front of the house for travellers or anyone who passes by to drink.

Independence

The word Thai means free, which best describes this characteristic of Thai people. This characteristic has united all Thais to fight against enemies during several perilous incidents.

Disregard for Time

This characteristic may be related to the fact that Thailand is primarily an agricultural country where seasons and sunlight are used to designate time. During the nighttime, the locations of stars are used in place of

sunlight to judge the time. Because this technique cannot ensure punctuality, it has become common for Thais to disregard time.

A Ready Smile

Thailand is known worldwide as the land of smiles. Most Thais, rich or poor, always have a smile on their faces. This propensity for smiling has been practiced for so long that it has become a habit for Thai people. Sometimes it is an unconscious behavior.

Materialism

Materialistic belongings in Thai society are used to signify the class of a person in the society. Clothes, accessories, cars, and houses are used to signify how powerful and respectable a person is. It is common for individuals who have money to try to obtain material objects which are either unique or expensive, such as the latest and most expensive cars, apparel from famous designers from Paris, and so forth.

Unadventurousness and Intolerance

Thai people prefer jobs that are stable and that guarantee a regular income, such as working for the government or a state enterprise. As a result, most businessmen in Thailand are either Chinese or Japanese who

have been taught to endure hardships and to always be ready to take risks in the business world.

An Affinity for Gambling

Most Thais want to be rich but do not like working. As a result, they try to obtain easy wealth by gambling. This characteristic explains why some Thais want to produce movies without any knowledge about them whatsoever. These individuals look at the movie industry as a form of gambling. They realize that if they are lucky they will earn a lot of money in a short period of time without much hard work.

A Passive Nature

Most Thais accept their fate and destiny as predetermined. They tend to be passive and to lack ambition. They are satisfied with what they have. This characteristic is the direct influence of Buddhism. According to their religion, what a person is, is the result of what he or she did in a past life. Therefore, nothing can be done to change their destiny. This is the reason most Thais do not try to change anything about their lives--they believe that their attempts would be useless.

A Love for Fun

For centuries, Thai people have integrated work and play. For example, during the harvest season, whole villages get together to reap a rice paddy in what appears to be a yearly ceremony. Workers sing and talk to each other as though they were at a social gathering rather than doing a task.

A Dislike for Discipline

Thais do not like rules or regulations. They do not want their lives to be bound by anything. They do not take anything seriously. Sometimes they carry their lack of discipline too far. Bangkok is considered one of the dirtiest cities in the world because its people litter everything everywhere, including the streets and canals. Pedestrians cross the streets wherever it is convenient.

Superstitions

Most Thais believe in spirits, ghosts, and angels. Their fascination with all types of supernatural power is reflected in several horror movies throughout the years.

Belief in the Extended Family System

There are words in Thai for older brother and sister, younger brother and sister, maternal aunt, paternal aunt, maternal uncle, and paternal uncle. The Thai people use

these words extensively to describe everyone they know, either through marriage or through casual acquaintance.

Politeness and Primness

Thais always show their respect to others. They are considerate of what other people think or feel, and try hard not to upset them (Suphab 1977, 6-20).

These twenty major values of Thai society are considered in this study in an attempt to find a form and content for movies which is uniquely Thai.

CHAPTER IV

THE DOMINANT CHARACTERISTICS OF THAI PERFORMING ARTS: THEIR INFLUENCES ON POPULAR THAI MOVIES

Thai movies are a reflection of the lives of members of the audience as well as of characters in the stories. Thai movies are a replica of life in the Thai society that everyone should accept and study, but not ignore because of shame or feelings of repulsiveness. No one can deny that the behaviors and feelings of Thais are evident in Thai movies (Thanawangnoi 1982, 75), but most Thai scholars compare Thai movies with movies from other countries without considering fundamental differences in the countries' life and cultures.

For centuries before movies came to Thailand, other forms of performing arts were indications of how Thai people lived, thought, and felt. As Nithi Eeosrivong (1973) points out, Thai movies are merely the extension of classical Thai performing arts and serve the same purpose. In this section, the form and content of classical Thai performing arts and how they have influenced Thai movies are examined. This examination provides insight into the role of Thai movies.

Most Thai filmmakers try to imitate Western, especially Hollywood, movies--both in form and content. By studying the basic standard of performing arts (including movies in this study), it becomes apparent that this is an attempt in the wrong direction. The foundation of Western performing arts (including movies) is based in classical Greek tragedy and comedy. The aim of Western drama is to reveal the problems faced by society. Western drama reflects an image of life as it is. It meditates thoughts which come out of an intense analysis of the story and the characters. In this sense, the philosophy of Greek drama is not so much to entertain as to involve in acknowledging the problems faced by the characters. It stimulates the audience to think and criticize while they are watching it. Even when the show ends, members of the audiences keep the problems in their minds and try to find answers for them. In fact, the problems are also a part of their everyday lives. In short, Western drama is more realistic than idealistic.

The major influence in Thai classical performing arts and literature came from India. The influence of Indian literature came indirectly centuries ago through Java, Malaya, and Ceylon. It also came directly from merchants, monks, and brahmans who came to Thailand to trade and to spread their religion. The influences of India in Thailand can be detected in the language, culture, traditions,

religion, values, literature, and performing arts (Nimnetiphan 1990, 35).

The theories of performing arts that Thai adopted from India regard entertainment as the most important ingredient. Thais emphasize an idealistic view of the arts. To Thai audiences, the story line is not as important as the description of the beauty of the heroine or the beauty of the virtue of the gods and goddesses. There are two schools in Indian literature and drama, Pali and Sanskrit. Pali literature is different from Sanskrit in the sense that Pali is based on teaching and textbooks. Sanskrit is the opposite. It is based on stories and the behavior of man and gods (Nimnetiphan 1990, 35).

Indian epics are similar to those of the Greek. They are very long and are composed in poetry. They are about the bravery of heroes, and gods and men. However, the characters in Indian epics are distinctively different from those of the Greek. In Indian epics, the human characters are put into two distinct categories--good and bad. Characters on the good side look good, both in physical appearance and behavior, and characters on the bad side look bad. When Thais received this influence from India, they slightly adapted the characteristics of the characters. However, the principal traits remained the same. It is obvious that Eastern epics are idealistic. On the contrary,

the characters in Greek epics and drama are more human-like. Characters can be both good and bad, strong and weak. In other words, Greek characters are well-rounded. Gods in Greek epics are the same. Western epics are more realistic (Nimnetiphan 1990, 36).

A clear-cut personality of each character is evident in each story. There are no grey areas in the characteristics of characters. The hero and heroine are not only attractive physically, they are also symbols of virtue. The hero must be very brave, gallant, and impartial. The heroine must be innocent, gentle, prim, well-behaved, forgiving, and, most of all, a virgin. Nithi Eeosrivong (1973) claims that this practice goes even deeper than the physical appearances and personality traits of the main characters. He theorizes that there is another level of reality--a psychological one. For example, Sida, the heroine in the Thai version of Indian Ramayana, grew up in the jungle. However, she was always dressed in an elaborate costume, the same way she was dressed after she became Ram's wife. Thai audiences accepted the way she was dressed and never questioned the reality of the character's everyday life. Sida was an incarnation of a goddess. She was faithful to her husband although, for a certain period of time, she was placed in a risky situation and environment. She was the ultimate symbol of virtue. Her virtuous spirit shone through her

tangible, earthly body. The audience saw her as an exquisitely beautiful woman. Her attire also always reflected her inner spirit. Good characters are also always rewarded at the end. They always accomplish what they struggle to achieve, and live happily ever after. Audiences also know that this is always the rule (Eeosrivong 1973, 50).

Most critics do not approve of the fact that in Thai movies, the heroine dresses fashionably even though she is poor and lives in a slum. Eeosrivong (1973) claims that, in fact, the filmmakers are trying to show the audience the state of mind of the character. By the same token, villains can also be identified through their physical appearance.

Another strong influence of Sanskrit drama and literature which has been imprinted on Thai performing arts is the ending of stories. There is a rule in Sanskrit drama that violence must not be shown on the stage, especially the death of major characters. Stories must have happy endings. The reason behind this rule is that Sanskrit plays (as well as Thai plays) are performed during the auspicious ceremonies. Audiences come to see them with a jovial spirit and do not expect to experience anything gloomy on such an occasion. Even though the story requires a gruesome incident, it is always remedied. If the hero is killed, someone revives him and brings him back to life.

One popular piece of literature is the exception, however. Its ending is different from any other. It is the story of Pra Rott and Maeri. Pra Rott was the hero who fell in love with Maeri, who was the daughter of a female giant. Her mother kept Pra Rott, his mother, and his aunts imprisoned for years. During this time, he knew that he could not survive living there, and finally, found a way to escape. Maeri followed him and begged for him to come back. He refused, despite his love for her. Before she died of grief, her last words were almost like a curse. She told him that she followed him in this lifetime, but that in the next lifetime he will be the one who has to follow and try to find her. Maeri was not revived in Pra Rott and Maeri, but both were reborn in another story, where they were called Pra Suthon and Manora. Pra Suthon had to travel for seven years, seven months, and seven days to find Manora who was half bird and half human and lived on a far away mountain. The story of Pra Suthon and Manora ended with a happy ending, as did the story of Pra Rott and Maeri (Prangwattanakul 1987, 28). This practice, which also extends into movies, explains why typical Thai movies always have happy endings.

Juree Vijitwathakarn claims that Thai audiences always hunger for a happy ending. Psychologically, it gives them hope and gratification that life is still worth living. At

the end of the story all the problems are solved, the villains are punished, and hero and heroine are married. In fact, life at the end is portrayed as being even better than at the beginning. The heroine who has been taken away from her wealthy parents discovers her true identity, and the villains are killed (Vijitwathakarn 1982, 57).

Like most countries in Asia, Thai society is a static one. This is obvious in the story line of most stage plays and literature. Not only must the ending be a happy one, it also must assure the audience that there will not be any changes in society. The resistance to any form of change and the static nature of Thai society are evident in several plays. Although the characters in a story may change, they must come back to the peacefulness of the beginning in the end (Eeosrivong 1973, 51). Throughout a story, characters often pose questions of vice, virtue, or justice in the society. Although the beginning of a story may challenge traditional values, the characters must accept the foundation of the society at the end. Most societal changes occur among individuals, but not in the social system or social structure. The happy endings also point out that life can be improved within the existing social system (Eeosrivong 1973, 51).

Findings that emphasize the fact that good conquers evil reflect Buddhistic teaching. Thai people believe that

good deeds are rewarded and wrong doings are punished. The ending in which every character receives the consequences of their actions and are either rewarded or punished, confirms this religious belief. It is more-or-less a moral lesson which is indispensable in Thai society (Thanawangnoi 1982, 79). The bond between religion and performing arts, in this case, is another form of influence from Indian literature and drama. As mentioned before, Indian drama came to Thailand through the spreading of Buddhism into the region. Therefore, it is possible that, at one point in time, drama was used to teach Thais moral lessons. Indian drama not only aims at entertaining, but also at showing human behaviors--pointing out good and bad to enlighten the audience (Nimnetiphan 1990, 38).

Superstition also plays a very important role in both Thai and Indian literature and drama. In the old days, plays were performed as a tribute to the holy spirits, the divinity, and all the gods, as well as for entertainment. Some forms of performing arts are still used as offerings to gods when the persons who arrange for them think that they have obtained something from the gods. Although Thais do not use movies for this purpose, a trace of their fascination with supernatural powers is still detectable. As mentioned earlier, most Thais are superstitious. They believe in magic, spirits, ghosts, and supernatural powers.

Horror movies have been one of the most popular genre among Thai moviegoers for several decades although a really outstanding one has never been made. Most of the horror/ghost movies are low budget movies which have appeared sporadically throughout the history of Thai films. Although there is no specific period that this genre is prominent, it is interesting to note that it always attracts a large audience. The main factor which draws audiences to this type of movies is the fascination of Thais with superstition.

The concept of supernatural powers, or monsters as some American film critics call them, in Thai movies is different from that in American movies. In American movies, the true subject of the horror is the struggle for recognition of all that the civilization represses or oppresses and the dramatization of its reemergence, as in nightmares, an object of horror, or a matter of terror. Happy endings, when they occur, typically signify the restoration of repression (Wood 1986, 75). Repressions in American culture are (a) sexual energy, together with its possible successful sublimation into non-sexual creativity; (b) bisexuality, which represents the most obvious and direct affront to the principle of monogamy and its supportive romantic myth of "the one right person"--the homosexual impulse in both men and women represents the most obvious threat to the norm of

sexuality as reproductive and restricted by the ideal of family; (c) the particularly severe repression of female sexuality and creativity, the attribution to the female of passivity, and preparation for a subordinate, dependent role; and, fundamentally, (d) the repression of the sexuality of children, which takes a variety of forms, from infancy through latency and puberty, and into adolescence--the process moving, indeed, from repression to oppression, from the denial of an infant's nature as a sexual being to a veto on the expression of sexuality before marriage (Wood 1986, 72-73). Another object of repression is the other, which includes other people, woman, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnic groups within the culture, alternative ideologies or political systems, and deviations from ideological sexual norms--notably bisexuality and homosexuality and children (Wood 1986, 74-75).

Thai horror movies are based on a fear and respect for the unknown. Thais believe in supernatural powers, destiny, fate, luck, coincidence, spirits, and ghosts. Moviegoers go to see these intangible subjects materialize on the screen, out of curiosity. Thai horror movies are not attempts to study the psyche of the audience. They are not even an attempt to make audiences better understand their belief in supernatural powers. Instead, the filmmakers simply take advantage of the audiences' curiosity and inquisitiveness

about this untouchable domain. For Thais, the world of ghosts and spirits elicits fear and awe. Although, like most people all over the world, Thai people are afraid of ghosts, they still want to see what they look like, but in a place and manner in which they are safe, as in a theater. The same thing is true about the subject of death. Everyone is afraid of it, but they still want to know more about it. Horror movies partially show them what might happen to them or where they might go after they die.

It is obvious that, in a popular genre like horror, Thais and Americans are basically different. Whereas American horror films spring from an attempt to understand the psyche of the filmmakers who make them, and the audiences who watch them generalize this understanding to the American people in general, Thai horror films present the domain of the supernatural as existing by and for itself. It is audiences who are curious about it and who want to examine it from a safe environment.

Another unique characteristic that Thai performing arts share with performing arts in most other countries in Southeast Asia is the role of clowns. In Sanskrit drama, when the hero or heroine, who normally are the king and queen, have to go through a difficult time, a clown appears to prevent the audience from feeling too sorry for the character or getting too bored. The clown, who relieves the

tension of the situation, is normally a court jester who faithfully follows his king everywhere he goes. Sometimes the clown is a confidant in whom the hero confides his love problems. Sometimes the clown acts as a matchmaker who brings the hero and heroine together. Thai drama also uses the role of the clown extensively. In a form of Thai performing arts called lakorn chatri (lakorn in Thai means stage play), there is a rule that there must be three main characters: the hero, the heroine, and a clown. The clown performs several functions, such as following the hero or the heroine, and assisting, giving advice, and providing a warning whenever there is a sign of danger (Nimnetiphan 1990, 40-41).

Several Thai critics blame the intrusion of clowns in Thai movies as an invasion of a sacred rule of Western performing arts which entirely separates the world on the stage (or the screen) from the world where the audience resides. Eeosrivong claims that the clowns in Thai movies play an important role in reminding the audience of the unreal setting of the stage and screen, and function as the voice of the audience. They can speak for the audience about how they think or feel about certain situations or certain characters, and can criticize the action of other characters. For example, when the hero complains constantly about his love for the heroine, the clown is free to make

fun of his blind love. In this sense, he reminds the audience of another reality beyond the make-believe world of the screen (Eeosrivong 1973, 49). The great love the hero has for the heroine, for the reality on the screen, seems refreshing. However, at another level of reality, which includes the audience, it may appear blind and funny. The clown works as a link between these two worlds by making comments (Eeosrivong 1973, 49).

The clown also serves another purpose. As mentioned previously, one of the characteristics of Thai people is that they are fun-loving. Thais incorporate games and jokes into almost everything they do. For this reason, movies with comic relief are always well accepted. In fact, comedies always make money in Thailand (Thanawangnoi 1982, 81).

The clown confirms the existence of the audience as an indispensable part of the show; thus, the influence of the audience on the performing arts is strongly realized. Unlike Western drama, in which the audience hides in the dark and watches what is going on on the stage as if peeping through the fourth wall, Thai audiences traditionally play a very important role in the performance. While in Western drama the existence of an audience is not recognized, in Thai drama the existence of the audience is accepted (Eeosrivong 1973, 97). There has never been any attempt in

Thai performing arts, especially the popular ones, to bar the audience from mingling with the actors on the stage. There has also never been an attempt to hide the actors from the view of curious audience members in order to maintain the make-believe atmosphere of the show.

One of the most popular forms of performance in Thailand is Li-ké. Li-ké has been in existence in Thailand for more than one hundred years. It is especially popular among people in the country and the lower middle-class in Bangkok. Many Li-ké fans are children. They usually sit as close to the stage as possible, or on the stage itself. Their main interest is the clown. During the whole show, they only wait for the moment when the clown comes out and makes them laugh. In fact, their enthusiasm starts even before the show begins. Some children gather at the back of the stage to watch the actors and actresses dress (Virulrak 1979, 227). Because there is no formal script for Li-ké performances, actors are free to add to their lines. If an actor finds an attractive woman among the audience, he may flirt with her and direct some of his lines to her to let her know that he likes her. The stage in Thai performing arts is not limited only to the space at the front of the auditorium. It covers everything that the actors and the audience can see. Actually, it also includes everything in the conscious mind of the audience (Eeosrivong 1973, 49).

Boonlua Thephayasuwan, a master in Thai classical literature, once said that Thai literature is different from Western literature in the sense that it does not pose questions. Thai stories develop like story-telling. For example, in I-Nao, which was developed from Indonesian literature, there is a practice within the family that a family member cannot marry anyone outside the family. No one has ever questioned whether that practice is right or wrong, or can do any harm to family members. In the story, I-Nao, the hero, is engaged to Busba, his cousin who he has not seen since both of them were young. I-Nao has met Jintara, a princess of another kingdom, and, although she does not relate to him in any way, he falls in love with her. However, he is also in love with Buska. When Busba and her family break off the engagement because of I-Nao's behavior, he plans to kidnap her. Thai audiences do not question whether the plan is right or not or whether it is proper to have more than one wife, especially if one of them is a cousin. Because Thai audiences prefer to see only the bright and pleasant side of the story, the primary interest is concentrated on the story development, characterization, and sharp dialogue. Although I-Nao is a regular romantic novel, it has been highly praised for its beautiful dialogue and descriptions of palaces and scenery (Nimnetiphan 1990, 52).

In an attempt to understand the meaning of Thai movies, Juree Vijitwathakarn (1982) concluded that, within the present surrounding of culture and society, it is not necessary for Thai movies to always systematically and reasonably mirror every aspect of reality. However, she notes that movies should not present anything which is too far from reality for audiences to relate to. Vijitwathakarn suggests that Thai movies should present stories that reflect the kind of lifestyles that are familiar and understandable to the Thai people. It is not necessary to present the problems that are of no concern to the Thai people, such as problems of loneliness and alienation. Those kinds of problems are of less interest to Thai audiences than problems concerning wives and mistresses, which are problems that are faced by most Thais in everyday life (Vijitwathakarn 1982, 56).

In Thai society, the family always plays the most important role in shaping a person's life. Contrary to what has been practiced in the United States and several other countries in the West, offspring live with their parents until they marry. When young people marry, they do not completely separate from their families. Their parents still play certain roles in their family life, such as giving advice and taking care of children from time to time. Some families continue to control family life completely.

Thai society is also a chauvinistic society, where men rule and women suffer. It is widely believed among Thai men that having several girlfriends proves a man's masculinity, even after he is married. Quarrels between wives and mistresses are very common in Thai society, which is supposed to be a monogamous society.

The center of most Thais' lives, however, is their family. Thais also believe in extended families, where the husband, wife, children, and in-laws all live together under the same roof, and are bonded together with love. At the same time, discord is unavoidable. Because almost all Thai movies have a happy ending--when the husband goes back to the wife or everyone in the family realizes their problems and tries successfully to solve them--moviegoers often depend on movies as a form of comfort and assurance that, regardless of what happens, monogamy is still the only form of accepted family life (Thanawangnoi 1982, 79-80).

Vijitwathakarn (1982) further claims that Thai movies should entertain the audience by incorporating all of life's components. She stresses that movies which attract Thai audiences should put all the flavors that life has to offer together for a complete and accurate portrayal of life. Life is a mixture of farce, love, virtue, sacrifice, fulfillment, excitement, happiness, bravery, and the conquest of obstacles. To highlight these facets of life,

the opposite sides should also be presented. Thus, Thai movies have everything from love to hate, fulfillment to disappointment, virtue to vice, and sorrow to happiness. Viewing Thai movies from this prospective makes it possible to understand why telling the story reasonably and systematically is not as important in Thai movies as presenting every aspect of life, by using the clowns, temptresses, and villains. The story can be entangled without the denouement, or the question can be posed without an answer. A double-sided picture of life in society is more important to Thai audiences than a realistic portrayal of it, a subtle story development, or reasonable and systematic story-telling (Vijitwathakarn 1982, 56).

The stories in Thai movies do not necessarily progress reasonably in a linear progression. The plot may be interrupted with comic gags or moral teachings. Thus, the story often does not continue smoothly. The endings are sometimes inconsistent with the entire story. Happy endings are the rule; anything is acceptable to reach a happy ending. Coincidences are very common. The heroine may be poor and live a hard life, but by sheer coincidence meet the hero who is the only son of a billionaire and has been educated abroad. In spite of their differences, they fall in love and marry at the end of the movie. In a movie that was shown several years ago, the heroine, played by

Petchara, is very poor and works as a lottery vendor. She is seen going through a series of suffering and hardships until the movie is almost over (most old Thai movies last approximately two hours), when it appears that the director realized that it was time to find a way to get her out of poverty. She then comes home one evening after a long day of work with four lottery tickets left. At first, she does not pay much attention to them, but when her confidant (the clown) suggests that she should check the radio broadcast for the winning numbers, all four tickets have the first prize winning number. It seems obvious that the director believed that only one first prize winning ticket would not make the heroine rich enough, so he gave her four. At that period of time, there was only one first prize winning number in each lottery drawing; however, the audiences never questioned the story's believability.

Having the heroine win the lottery or become instantly wealthy after discovering her true identity is, however, significant in the sense that it is in line with the characteristics of Thai people. As mentioned earlier, most Thai people love gambling and do not like hard work. Subconsciously, these happy endings satisfy the majority of the audiences by suggesting that unexpected wealth is possible (Thanawangnoi 1982, 80).

The last unique characteristic of Thai movies is the role of superstars. Foster Hirsh (1991) explains how Hollywood superstars are made: First, actors and actresses must be as charismatic as the scripts claim they are. Chevalier has to be utterly disarming, Colbert has to incarnate a national ideal, and Cooper has to be a sexual icon. In star roles, defined by the scale of their demand, performers must embody the power or talent or potency that distinguish their characters from others. The star role compels audiences, like the characters within a film, to appreciate and acknowledge the very qualities that helped the actor to get the part (Hirsh 1991, 247).

The role of superstar in Thai performing arts is something much more complex than that described by Hirsh (1991), however. In fact, the issue of hero, heroine, and superstar in Thai classical literature and drama (and also movies) is complicated enough to deserve a whole study by itself. In Thai classical drama and literature, almost all of the heroes and heroines are kings and queens or god's reincarnation. In the old days, drama and literature were performed and composed to praise them. In plays and literature there is no inclination to show any form of contempt or make fun of them (Nimnetiphan 1990, 26). This practice confirms the characteristic of Thai people, that they respect the king and put him and his family above

everything else. The loyalty that Thai people had for the monarchy for centuries made them want to see stories that had a (fictional) king as the hero again and again. (No one is allowed to write, stage a play, or make a movie about the real king or his ancestors.) As time passed, heroes and heroines were brought closer to the audience in new plays that substituted regular people for the kings. These substitutes, however, still maintained the qualities that ideal kings and queens were expected to possess, to a certain extent. They were either very rich, highly educated, intelligent, brave, virtuous, or compassionate. In other words, the new generation of heroes and heroines were the old generation of kings and queens reincarnated.

In Thai classical performing arts, the heroine in one story is not easily distinguishable from the heroine in another because their qualities are almost identical. Heroines are almost all the same in the sense that they are the symbol of ultimate virtue. The theory of how a superstar is made in Thai movies is the same as in American movies. In the history of Thai movies, there have been only four real superstars: Mitre Chaibancha, Petchara Chaowaraj, Soraphong Chatri, and Jarunee Suksawat. In all of their movies, all four of them have maintained their same personas.

Mitre Chaibancha always portrayed macho-type men who had hearts of gold. Mitre was much taller and bigger than the average Thai man; therefore, he always appeared stately and strong. In person, he was as kind and gentle as he appeared in his movies.

Petchara Chaowaraj began as a beauty queen. Her reign was during the time she starred as Mitre's female counterpart. She was always portrayed as virgins who were innocent, good-hearted, and ready to forgive and forget. She had beautiful, sparkling eyes. Because of her striking eyes, she became a victim of show business. She used eye-drops constantly to enhance them because the media constantly called attention to them. The drops, combined with the glare of the reflectors which she had to face every day, left her blind by the end of her career.

Soraphong Chatri and Jarunee Suksawat are a later generation of superstars. Because Soraphong is shorter and slighter than Mitre, he less often portrays tough guys. The characters he portrays are usually well-rounded men who use their brains more than their physical strength. However, he still appears as a virtuous hero who sometimes elicits empathy and is charming, compassionate, forgiving, proud, and dignified. Unlike Mitre, his characters sometimes have flaws. However, what distinguishes him from other characters and places him above them is the fact that at a

certain point in each movie, he recognizes his shortcoming and tries to amend it.

Jarunee Suksawat began her acting career while she was still a student, and her first role was as a student. She always portrays a tough little girl, somewhat of a tomboy. She is not helpless like Petchara, however. On the contrary, she fights back against all the villains who try to hurt her. Again, Jarunee always portrays the perpetual virgin.

All four superstars share the same background and the same type of personality in many ways. All four were born poor. After Mitre was born, his parents left him to live with an uncle who was a monk. His mother came to take him to Bangkok when he was eight years old. They lived a very poor life. Petchara's life was a little better. She had both parents. Nevertheless, her family did not have enough to feed their eight children. She had to work from the time she was very young. Soraphong came to Bangkok from the country to find a job. He worked with Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, doing everything from cleaning to running errands. He got his first break in a small role in one of Prince Chatrichalerm's early movies. Jarunee lived with her grandmother most of her life. She did all kinds of odd jobs to support her grandmother and her siblings.

Because most Thai moviegoers live in the country, have low incomes, and are not highly educated, the superstars partially share their dream. Most Thai audiences look at the world of movies as a glamorous world. Although actors and actresses come from different backgrounds, these four superstars come from almost the same background as the majority of Thai audiences. Therefore, to a certain extent, they represent the audiences' dreams. They confirm the hope that becoming a superstar in an enchanting world is not too far from their audiences' reach.

Most actors and actresses, after they become famous, tend to be arrogant. Mitre, Petchara, Soraphong, and Jarunee did not follow this trend. Mitre remained humble, polite, and very generous. He always gave a large part of his income to a monastery in Bangkok. The following story describes his personality. One time a lady and her husband went to find Mitre in a movie theater where she was told that he would be. She wanted him to appear in front of his fans for a charity. She had never seen him in person before and did not know what to expect. A man in the projection room pointed to a big man in old clothes curled up and sleeping comfortably on the floor in a corner of the room. When she approached him, she found that he was Mitre Chaibancha, the superstar. She found him to be polite and

enthusiastic about helping without mentioning any expenses or fee (Photharamik 1982, 47-48).

Petchara's acting career was, most of the time, enhanced by having Mitre as her male counterpart. After he died, her popularity declined. Even during her reign with Mitre, audiences tended to be more interested in Mitre than in her. However, she was always described as a sweet and friendly person.

Soraphong worked hard to be a success in his career. Unable to read or write in English, he hired translators to translate textbooks on acting and films which were written in English. As a person who was nice and friendly to everyone, he was often found during breaks sitting on the floor or the pavement having lunch or dinner with some of the crew members. He was also one of very few stars that made it a rule for himself to always be punctual. He said that he learned that from Mitre Chaibancha. Everyone in the film industry, present and past, respected Mitre because he was always on time.

Jarunee Suksawat is a sweet, quiet, and cute girl, who appealed to audiences of every age. She lives a very clean and proper life, and takes very good care of her grandmother and all of her brothers and sisters. She, in fact, lives up to the picture her fans have of her from her movies. There have never been any bad rumors about her.

The four superstars had what was required; they were all charismatic. Mitre Chaibancha was described as very tall and strong with dark eyebrows, a prominent nose, and a pair of sparkling eyes. Yunyong Photharamik (1982), a psychiatrist, explains that Mitre was a perfect combination of male and female. He had a sweet smile and was gentle like a woman, but at the same time, was tough like a man. It was these qualities that created his intense sex appeal (Photharamik 1982, 47). However, more important than their charm was the fact that all four were approachable and down-to-earth. Typical Hollywood superstars (especially those of the 1940s and 1950s) were put on a pedestal, but Thai audiences subconsciously pull their idols closer to them. Mitre, Petchara, Soraphong, and Jarunee all possessed the qualities of the kings and queens in the classical Thai performing arts. At the same time, they had a great deal in common with the majority of their audiences. Thus, they represent an attainable dream.

These four superstars were also a product of the press. They were always portrayed as they appeared in the movies, virtuous, friendly, kind, and gentle. Their pictures appeared constantly in the star magazines. Their life stories were published again and again until the readers felt that they knew almost everything about them. Their pasts were not a secret to their fans. Unlike several

actors and actresses who had shady pasts, Mitre, Petchara, Soraphong, and Jarunee had nothing to hide about either their childhood or adulthood before they became famous. However, the press was very selective in certain areas concerning these four superstars' personal lives. One area which everyone intentionally left untouched was the details about their love lives. Mitre had a wife and a son before he became famous. He separated from his wife and lived with an actress for a number of years, which is unacceptable in Thai society. When she left him, another actress moved in with him. Soraphong was married, but, at the same time, had several lovers. All this information was kept from their fans. They were always portrayed as single and available. Their availability intrigued their female fans.

Juree Vijitwathakarn (1982) points out that Thai audiences practice a personality cult. They prefer only a limited number of actors. They admire only actors that possess the certain qualities. They do not believe that each character in each movie requires a different actor. Thai audiences prefer to have one idol and to put him above all other actors (Vijitwathakarn 1982, 58). When audiences go to see a movie, they subconsciously go to see a star such as Mitre, or Petchara, or Soraphong, or Jarunee, and not the characters in the movie. Mitre, Petchara, and Jarunee usually played themselves, but Soraphong was different. He

attempted to be a character actor rather than a personality actor. He worked hard to perfect his craft, and was successful.

None of the four are still making movies. Mitre died twenty years ago, Petchara and Soraphong retired, and Jarunee appears only occasionally on television. Jarunee is considered by most media critics as the last true superstar in the history of Thai films. Up until the present, no other stars have possessed all the required qualities for Thai audiences to accept them as superstars.

This section cannot be complete without mentioning the form of mainstream Thai movies, although it plays only a minor role in shaping them. The form of Thai movies is not as complex as the content. Most Thai movies present a story in chronological order. If there is any reference to what happened in the past, the common practice is to have a character relate the story rather than to use flashbacks. Cross-cutting between scenes is not a common practice. This may be because most filmmakers are not proficient at it. It also makes it easier for audiences to follow the story and not be confused. Thai audiences also like seeing movies that are simple and easy to understand. When they see that the hero and the heroine are happy at the end, and that the villains are punished, they are happy. That is their primary concern. Occasionally they may dream to be like the

hero or heroine. Generally, Thai people like a comfortable life, reject strict rules and regulations, enjoy easy living, and do not take life too seriously. Therefore, they prefer to watch easy-to-understand movies that are entertaining in order to temporarily escape from everyday reality. Thai audiences generally do not pay much attention to the production techniques, camera set-ups, or lighting arrangements (Thanawangnoi 1982, 85).

CHAPTER V

PROBLEMS IN THE FILM INDUSTRY IN THAILAND

In order to determine the proper form and content for Thai movies, the problems that face the film industry in Thailand must be considered. These problems significantly limit the growth of Thai movies. Some of the major problems in the Thai movie business are discussed in the following sections.

Censorship

Censorship is regarded by most filmmakers in Thailand as an obstacle in the development, growth, and maturity of Thai movies. Other problems faced by those in the film industry are not beyond their control. While other elements that work as a hindrance to Thai movies occur in the industry itself, censorship is mainly controlled by a group of individuals on the outside, who, in most cases, do not understand how movies are made or even what the movies are all about.

The Censorship Act was first issued in 1930, during the reign of His Majesty King Rama VII. The essence of the law is that

it is forbidden to show or perform at the theaters the pictures that consist of the material that may violate the peace and morality. . . . Any material that shows an inclination in that direction is also forbidden (Prasertskul 1988, 1).

In 1972, a proclamation was made authorizing the Police Department to be in charge of censorship until there was an amendment in the law concerning movies. This was the beginning of the Police Department's involvement in censorship, which is still in effect today. There was never any form of amendment as was promised in the proclamation. The 1930 Act is still used in censoring movies. The act makes specific provision in the constitution of the Board of Film Censors for the examination of films, both domestic and foreign.

The Board of Film Censors is composed of a chairman and seven honorary members who are appointed by the government. Members of the board are appointed for three years, but can be eligible for reappointment. The board meets at least once every three months, but meetings can be called as necessary. Decisions are made by a majority vote, and the chairman exercises a vote in case of a tie. The chairman has the power to determine the conditions of service with the previous approval of the government (Pimpan 1975, 72).

General Principles

The Board of Film Censors sets the principal rules to guide the board in sanctioning films for public exhibition as follows:

1. No picture should show in an unflattering light the members of institutions of a foreign country with which the country has relations.
2. All pictures designed for export into the foreign market should "sell" the Thai way of life.
3. No pictures should emphasize drinking, delinquency, divorce, or any immoral subject.

Censorable Material

Films are not to be classified as suitable for public exhibition, either unrestricted or restricted, to adults if they:

1. Deal with crime in such a manner as to (a) uphold criminal acts, (b) enlist the sympathy or admiration of the audience for criminal characters, or (c) create the impression that crime pays or is a normal incident of ordinary life and not to be reprobated;
2. Deal with vice or immorality in such a manner as to (a) uphold vicious or immoral acts, (b) depict vice or immorality as attractive, or (c) cast a halo of success or glory around the vicious or immoral;

3. Deal with relations between sexes in such a manner as to show (a) rape, premeditated seduction, or criminal assaults on women, (b) illicit sexual relations, or (c) nudity; or

4. Are intended or are likely to (a) wound the susceptibilities of any foreign nation or any community or the followers of any religion, or (b) promote disorder, violence, a breach of the law or disaffection or resistance to government (Pimpan 1975, 74).

It is obvious that almost every one of these principles is obscure. There are no guidelines that specify the extent of any terms. For example, what should be characterized as violence? To what extent can an act be called violent? The lack of definition of the terms used makes it possible for each committee to look at certain acts in its own way. Ten people define nudity in ten different ways. Some people consider a woman in a bikini nude; whereas, to most people, nudity means showing the entire body without clothes. For some, suggestive nudity is as unacceptable as outright nudity. For example, a close shot of a woman with naked shoulders and hints that she has no clothes on is considered obscene by some people. However, for others the same picture is acceptable as a proper alternative to a completely naked person.

Nikom Intasen, a film censorship section inspector, explained in an interview that each committee member uses his or her own judgement in censoring each scene. If committee members disagree, a vote is taken (Intasen 1992). It is significant to note that most committee members are conservative. They believe strongly in the morality of the people, religion, and society. If these members find any part of a film to be objectionable, they cut it out (Pimpan 1975, 74).

In actuality, the censoring system used in Thailand today is out of line with reality. The general rules are not clear-cut. Committee members know nothing about film art or other art forms which are directly and indirectly related to filmmaking. They use the knowledge they have in their field of expertise to judge something which exists in a completely different professional world. The chairman of the committee loves children and has a daughter who is a teacher. If he watches a movie that shows an adult kicking a child, and the adult is a villain and is punished because of his wrongdoing at the end of the movie, the chairman objects to the child being abused and orders the scene to be cut immediately, without considering the consequences shown at the end of the movie.

Thai filmmakers also complain that the committee is usually too lenient on foreign films. Scenes with violent

killings, gruesome deaths, nudity, and seductive kissing are sometimes left in a film, uncut because the committee agrees that they are a part of Western culture. If the same scenes appeared in Thai movies, they would be cut immediately. As a result, it is very difficult for filmmakers to try anything new. Actions of the censoring committee are difficult to predict because there are no standards for their decisions. An entire film was once banned because the title gave a hint of anti-monarchy. None of the committee members even considered the total contour of the movie. If the title is not right, the committee tends to assume that the movie as a whole is not right either.

Censorship has been considered a form of business suicide in the motion picture industry. While filmmakers continue to produce films in constant conflict and fear of censorship, they undoubtedly sense a threat from the censorship rules, but cannot clearly identify and understand their nature. Filmmakers find it easier to continue making movies about husbands, wives, and mistresses, or light and senseless comedy about teenagers who have nothing substantial to do with their lives. Filmmakers realize that this kind of movie is safer than those that portray life realistically and more seriously.

The Lack of Money

Most film producers in Thailand have very limited funds. At present, there are three levels of productions, based on their budgets:

1. Shooting expense--4,000,000 to 5,500,000 baht, or approximately 153,846 to 211,538 United States dollars, laboratory fee--2,200,000 to 4,500,000 baht, or approximately 84,615 to 173,076 United States dollars;

2. Shooting expense--3,200,000 to 3,800,000 baht, or approximately 123,076 to 133,000 United States dollars, laboratory fee--2,200,000 to 2,400,000 baht, or approximately 84,615 to 92,307 United States dollars;

3. Shooting expense--800,000 to 1,000,000 baht, or approximately 30,769 to 38,461 United States dollars, laboratory fee--800,000 to 1,000,000 baht, or approximately 30,769 to 38,461 United States dollars.

Advertising expenses follow the standard of each film. An 800,000 baht budget film is not aimed at audiences in Bangkok or the cities that surround it. Advertising expenses are set at around 400,000 baht. For movies in the second level, the advertising expenses are between 2,000,000 baht and 4,000,000 baht. This figure may be as high as four or five million if a movie is successful in first class theaters in Bangkok.

Each year, approximately 40 to 50 movies are made at the first and second levels, and about 100 to 120 movies are made at the third level. The three levels automatically set their own bargain in the market. Movies made within the first and second levels are more at risk than movies in the third level. If a film is not popular, the producer sells it to the distributors at a high price; however, there will be a bargain to reduce it or the advance check will bounce. The distributors in Thailand have divided their areas of marketing into six regions. The price for each movie depends upon its level. Level 1 movies are sold for 8 to 10 million baht, Level 2 movies are sold for 6 to 7 million baht, and Level 3 movies are sold for 2.8 to 3.3 million baht.

These numbers are for all six regions, which means that a third level movie is sold to the distributors for only 700,000 baht each. Thus, the distributors are not in a risky situation, and the producers usually have a chance to generate some profit. Most of the movies made at the third level are action movies, horror mixed with sex, or senseless comedy (Prasertskul 1988, 2).

It is important to note that the investment in filmmaking in Thailand, even at the first and second levels, is aimed mainly at the domestic market. Although there have been several attempts to produce films for international

markets, it is difficult to say that the first- and second-level movies are fully acceptable as artistic movies according to international standards because of shortcomings related to equipment, qualified personnel, and funds.

Most filmmakers get loans from institutions such as banks or distributors. The interest on these loans is usually very high; therefore, they have to try to finish shooting as soon as possible. At the same time, they have to try to save on expenses as much as possible. The results of the rush and limited budgets are movies that are far from perfect. This is always the case with independent producers and directors. Their production teams are usually small, and each crew member may have to handle five or six duties at the same time. They often rent trucks to carry their equipment and the entire crew in one trip. The director (who may also be the producer) drives. The star usually sits in the passenger seat beside the director because that is the most comfortable seat in the truck. All of the equipment, including the meals and water are piled into the back of the truck. Crew members sit or stand wherever they can find an empty space among the equipment and food.

Independent production teams in Thailand can be compared to a band of bandits, whereas teams in hollywood are like a mighty army. In Hollywood, each production team usually has several air-conditioned buses. Each is equipped

with a bedroom, a dressing room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. Each production team consists of at least thirty crew members. Production teams in Thailand usually consist of three or four key personnel who are the director, the cinematographer, and assistants. The director directs the stars, the supporting actors, and the extras. He also writes and revises the script to fit the situation. He must also draft his own schedule, make all calls and arrangements, and, most important, be personally responsible for producing the film for a given amount of money. Because the budget is often small, he must know what constitutes the major expenditures and do everything possible to reduce the cost for each individual production. The cinematographer operates the camera, sets up and adjusts the lights, and helps with continuity.

Strictly speaking, the poor quality of Thai films is not attributable to a lack of equipment or talent so much as to a lack of proper planning and intelligent application. The director in Thailand is the key figure in drawing out the best from the actors. Because of the great burden of production responsibilities, his directing responsibilities are often slighted, and the result is a film without a professional touch. All of these factors contribute to the poor quality of Thai films today (Pimpan 1975, 27).

Another type of production team is the one that works for a well-established production company. The directors, who work as employees of the companies, are in a better situation because the budget is usually larger. However, their duties are basically the same. They usually have control over every aspect of a film as it is shot, except in the beginning, when producers make suggestions concerning the cast for key roles. They may also be involved in developing the scripts to make sure that the movie will make a profit. If the movie makes a profit, the director gets a percentage. However, if it does not make a profit, the production team is expected to pay the producer a certain amount of money, based on how much is lost.

In well-established companies, directors estimate the expenses for an entire production. If the producers agree with their estimate, they get that amount. Directors usually have to propose a minimum figure in order to get it approved. This way the directors have to be very strict with how they spend the money. They have to be very cautious about how much film they use, how much they pay the crew, and how much they spend on food and beverages for the production teams. The remaining money, after expenses, is theirs (Udomdej 1982, 90). It is obvious that the strain is tremendous for a director. He is expected to be a businessman as well as a creator of an art work. It is

difficult for a director to make a good movie when he is constantly distracted by monetary concerns.

The pay for people who work in the industry (except for the producers) is very low in Thailand compared to every other country. Manop Udomdej (1982) explains very clearly how this problem affects the development of Thai movies. He claims that almost everyone working in the film business has a family to take care of. When a director finishes working on one movie, he cannot foresee when the next project will come along. During that time, he must live on the meager pay received from his last movie. This makes it difficult for a director to conjure up ideas for the next movie (Ekutta and Chareonsri 1992, 164). Average pay for first- and second-class film directors is between 50,000 and 150,000 baht (approximately \$1,923 to \$5,769). Third-level film directors make between 20,000 and 40,000 baht (approximately \$769 to \$1,500). Directors usually do not get paid in one payment. They usually get the first half before they start shooting and the second half after the movie is released. If the movie does not do very well at the box-office, the checks they receive as the second payment are often not covered by adequate funds.

The average pay for scriptwriters ranges from 20,000 to 200,000 baht (approximately \$692 to \$6,920). Only Cherd Songsri, who began as a writer, became a film producer and

director, and wrote his own scripts, has ever received 200,000 baht for a script. That was the largest amount ever paid for a screenplay written in Thailand. Because very few directors and scriptwriters can truly depend on filmmaking as their only career, most have to rely on other jobs for a regular income. This means that they cannot devote their time between projects entirely to working on the next movie.

Lack of Well-Trained Actors and Good Material

Talent is not necessarily connected with income or status. Stars are not always gifted. Some are truly distinguished, others are good, and still others may owe their success primarily to their photographic qualities and personalities. In Thailand, getting suitable roles is an important problem for all film stars. A good actor can become successful because of a strong role which offers the potential to develop, or can be embarrassed by a meaningless role (Pimpan 1975, 28).

There are few film stars in Thailand compared with other film producing nations. Due to the lack of film stars in the industry, actors often must play more than one role at a time, sometimes for several different companies. Heavy dependence upon two or three major stars causes extreme difficulties for directors and the stars as well. Anything can happen to a star. This was an even greater problem when

stars did their own stunts. In fact, this was what killed Mitre Chaibancha.

In the early days of films, stars played a very important role in determining the success of a movie. Twenty years ago, any movie that had Mitre and Petchara as the leading male and female was guaranteed to be successful. When Mitre died in the helicopter accident, the popularity that Petchara had enjoyed for almost a decade began to decline. Sombat Methanee and Aranya Namvong, although not as popular as Mitre and Petchara, took over their reign. Almost a decade later, Soraphong Chatri and Naowaratt Yukthanand reigned as stars. Movies starring Soraphong attracted large audiences. In 1979, the movie business was revitalized with the discovery of Jarunee Suksawat. No distributor refused a movie that had Jarunee as the star. Instead, they paid especially high prices for her movies.

Stars who are in such high demand usually do not have a chance to study their roles. They often cannot remember the character of each role because they are working on several movies at the same time. Sinjai Hongthai, a very talented actress, once said that when she first began her acting career, her duty was only to listen to the director explain what she had to do and say in a scene being shot. Sometimes she played a daughter and did not even know who the

character's parents were. All popular actors and actresses have faced the same problem.

Very few movies made in Thailand are made with sound because the cost is much higher than having the sound dubbed by a team of sound professionals in the laboratory. This technique also eliminates the need for the actors to memorize dialogue. They can also be prompted during the shooting. This technique makes it difficult, however, for actors to build up the emotions required in a scene. The rhythm of the conversation has to follow the speed and how well each actor can capture the prompt. Sometimes an actor cannot hear clearly what the prompter says, and has to wait for it to be repeated. This unnecessarily prolongs conversations. Because directors try to save film as much as possible, mistakes are often not corrected by reshooting.

A shortage of good material is another problem faced by the movie industry. Good material in this sense means good stories. Manob Udomdej (1988) says that, in fact, good stories are not hard to find. However, stories that are suitable to the budgets that directors receive from the producers are hard to find.

An ideal story is one that can be made within a limited budget and can guarantee success in the market. Filmmakers usually buy the rights to a novel from its author. This is the first major problem that directors encounter. To keep

expenses within the budget, they are often forced to reduce the scope of the novel to a size that will work.

Lack of Qualified Personnel

At present, the three major educational institutions that produce filmmakers to feed the market are Chulalongkorn University, Thammasart University, and Bangkok Technical College. According to Cha-um Prasertskul of the Department of Motion Pictures and Still Photography at Chulalongkorn University, the programs at Chulalongkorn and Thammasart Universities are more academic than technical, and emphasize the literary side of moviemaking.

Several courses are offered in film production. Unfortunately, students choose their major when they are in their junior year, which gives them only two years to concentrate on the study of films. This practice does not allow enough time for students to actually learn and practice. Prasertskul relates further that he has received complaints from his students that the department does not provide them with the technical skills necessary to actually work on a real production team. The problem is that because Chulalongkorn University is an academic institution which is striving to be recognized as the first research university in Thailand, the structure of the curriculum is designed to create scholars, not practitioners. When these scholars

attempt to survive in the real world of moviemaking, they find their skills inadequate because the situation in the film business in Thailand is entirely different from what they learned from textbooks and in the classroom. They are not well-equipped to solve the problems that true professional filmmakers face in everyday life (Prasertskul 1992).

A lack of up-to-date equipment and laboratories for students is another problem faced by film departments. At Chulalongkorn University, most of the equipment available for students would be more suitable in a museum. One of the cameras being used there dates back to World War II. The number of cameras available for students is also very limited, and the number of students far exceeds the number of cameras available to them.

Thammasart University is in a better situation. The program there requires film majors to take a whole semester of practical training where they work with a professional production team from the beginning of a movie to the end. Students from Thammasart are better equipped to succeed in the film industry than are students from Chulalongkorn. Thammasart students also have the reputation for being tougher and willing to work harder.

As the oldest and the best university in Thailand, the average entrance examination score required to be accepted

in Chulalongkorn is usually the highest among all public universities. Students who are accepted into Chulalongkorn are normally the best in the country. Throughout their four years in the university, they are constantly reminded of how exceptional and smart they are, by the uniform they wear and by the mere mention of the name of the university. With that much recognition, Chulalongkorn students often become helplessly arrogant. Within the film industry in Thailand, graduates and interns from Chulalongkorn University are highly respected, but not readily accepted.

Bandit Rittakol, one of the most successful directors in Thailand today, says that Chulalongkorn graduates usually enter the industry with very high expectations. They have, academically, learned how Western filmmakers make movies. They often have their own ideas that they want to use in the project that they are training on even though they are not working as directors. In reality, no one can begin as a director from their very first day of work. Students should realize that they must begin as assistants and not as the originators of ideas. Students often believe that once they graduate with a degree in films, they can be Spielberg or a Kurosawa right away. They are not prepared to struggle their way up to that level, and are often unwilling to tolerate hard work (Bangsaparn 1992, 24). Cherd Songsri described film graduates who trained in his production

company as jars filled to the rim with water. They can not take any more water, which means that they are not receptacles for new ideas (Songsri 1992).

Competition from Foreign Movies

The report from the Committee for the Study of Thai Movies Production states that although Thailand has been producing movies for several decades, the Thai film industry still does not play a role in bringing foreign currency into the country. On the contrary, the number of foreign movies imported into the country increases every year, and the amount of money spent per movie also increases (Department of Foreign Affairs of the Ministry of Economics 1972, 19).

Originally, it was Western traders who triggered the foundation of the film industry in Thailand. In 1897, S. G. Marchovsky introduced the films of the French Lumière brothers to the inhabitants of Bangkok. Ever since, Western companies such as Pathé Frères, Biograph, and Concert Parisene, Imperial Bioscope, British Cinematograph, Royal Vitascope, Edison Cinematograph, and American Phonograph have dazzled Bangkokians with their latest wares with increasing frequency (Boonyaketmala 1992, 64).

Since the early 1930s, the films imported in Thailand have been predominantly from America, followed by Hong Kong, India, and Japan. American films always generate the most

revenue in both the first and second run theaters in Bangkok. In 1972, the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Ministry of Economics issued a report from a committee for the study of Thai movies production and the importing of foreign movies into Thailand describing the first-, second-, and third-run theaters as follow:

1. First-run theaters show movies that have never been shown before. Of the thirty first-run theaters in Bangkok at that time, twelve showed Western movies which include American, Italian, British, Australian, and Spanish.

Four of the first-run theaters showed mainly Thai movies, nine showed only Chinese movies, and five showed Indian and Japanese movies.

The income generated by first-run theaters in Bangkok was as follows:

- a. The twelve theaters that showed mainly Western movies made approximately 86,000,000 baht a year (or \$4,300,000).

- b. The four theaters that showed mainly Thai movies generated approximately 27,000,000 baht a year (or \$1,350,000).

- c. The rest of the first-run movies, that showed movies from Hong Kong, Japan, and India generated approximately 80,000,000 a year (or \$4,000,000).

Most of the theaters in other provinces did not show movies from any other particular country. However, Thai movies have been the most popular among country people. They generate 30 to 40 percent of the total revenue per year.

2. Second-run theaters show movies that have already been shown in first-run theaters. Most second-run theaters are located upcountry. In Bangkok alone, there are presently about seventy-five second-run theaters.

3. Third-run theaters show movies that have been shown in first- and second-run theaters. Most second-run theaters are located in remote, under-developed areas (Department of Foreign Affairs of the Ministry of Economics 1972, 33-34).

Although these data were collected twenty years ago, it still serves as a guideline to consider how screen time in Thailand, especially Bangkok, is dominated by foreign movies.

The most recent figures show that there are 105 movie theaters in Bangkok, and around 900 in upcountry areas (from Film Censorship Section). Although the number of movie theaters has tripled over the years, the revenue for Thai movies at the box office has dropped dramatically. In the mid-1970s, the film industry generated around \$144 million per year around the country, by the early 1990s this figure had dropped to \$48 million (Boonyaketmala 1992, 87).

What has changed in the past ten years is that movie theaters have become smaller. Mini-theaters have become increasingly popular. Also, with the popularity of teen movies, several theaters which used to show only Western movies have started to show Thai movies as well. However, American movies still continue to dominate the screen in Bangkok (see Appendix). Most theater owners consider American movies to be sure income, which means there is not much risk involved in showing them. American movies always have a certain number of loyal audiences in Thailand and because of their high standards of production, American movies guarantee a regular income for the theaters. Chinese and Indian movies also have loyal fans. Most of their fans are the Chinese and Indians who live in Thailand.

Although Thai movies also have loyal fans, Thai audiences have become much more selective. Only Thai movies that are considered very good can make money. There are no longer superstars to draw audiences. In fact, the taste of Thai audiences have changed to the point that Thai moviegoers no longer hold on to a particular star as they once did. The drop in the revenue of Thai movies is an indication of the decline in their popularity. Several film scholars believe that Thai movie production will become extinct unless something is done to rescue it.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FILM

CONTENTS AND FILM CURRICULUM

The Thai film industry has a long history of struggling to find an identity that is uniquely Thai. Several filmmakers lost their way in the struggle and faded from the scene. However, many were determined to continue fighting, and from time to time an innovative movie was produced. When these attempts were successful, they generated new hope among individuals involved in the industry. Unfortunately, superior movies and success do not always relate to each other. It is the risk that Thai filmmakers have to take within a system in which profits are mandatory. Budgets are the main issue in the moviemaking business in Thailand. Film directors never have enough money to make respectable movies, but are expected to generate profits for their producers. The pressure that film directors face is tremendous. One way to reduce the strain caused by money problems is to expand the market for Thai movies to other countries. The only way to accomplish this is to make movies that are universal enough to be accepted and

understood by international audiences. The problem is in determining what is considered universal for Thai movies.

Recommendations for Film Contents

Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol once said that he made movies about "seemingly insignificant people struggling in seemingly insignificant situations." Nevertheless, those situations either directly or indirectly involve everyone in the society. Thai society consists of all the seemingly insignificant people (such as merchants, laborers, students, housewives, etc.) who have to face what are seemingly insignificant situations in their everyday lives (such as not having enough money to buy food for dinner, etc.). These problems directly reflect the economic situation of the entire country. For example, Kao Chue Karn (His Name is Karn) is about an insignificant rural doctor and his conflict with society. Theptida Longlaam (The Motel Angel) is about a prostitute, who is neither a good or bad person, and her fight to be respected as a human being (Bangsaparn 1992, 110).

Movie characters represent a majority of the people in Thailand, especially working class people who constitute the majority of the movie audience. Interviews with workers in several factories located at the outskirts of Bangkok revealed that the workers chose to watch movies that they

can relate to; movies that, in a sense, reflect their lives or speak for them.

Prince Chatrichalerm wrote the scripts for his movies himself. All of his scripts, except the first and the latest one that he made, are successful, both commercially and artistically. As a matter of fact, several characteristics in his movies indicate the right direction for Thai movies. His films are either an adaptation of Western films or an adaptation of popular novels. A few were inspired by particular incidents which did not attract much attention from the general public when they actually took place. What is very special about Prince Chatrichalerm is his ability to entirely transform a story from its original source to one that is acceptable to Thai audiences. As mentioned before, duplication is unavoidable in film art. What stands out in his work is the fact that almost no trace of the original source is apparent.

For nearly two decades, Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol has made artistic movies which appeal to general Thai audiences. The major traits of his movies, which conform to the characteristic of popular Thai movies, are as follow:

1. The characters in every one of his movies have very clear-cut traits which allow the audience to tell right away who is the hero, the heroine, or the villain.

2. All of the required characters are indispensable in all of his movies. Every movie has a hero, a heroine, and a villain.

3. Although his main plots are usually aimed at social criticism, he always adds several subplots that deal with family problems (such as infidelity in a marriage, problems with teenagers, love triangle, etc.) which Thai audiences like to see.

Prince Chatrichalerm, at the same time, intentionally defies several characteristics of popular Thai movies. First of all, he eliminates the sacred role of the clown. If there is a funny character, he or she has to be a part of the story, and has to play a role in developing the plot. Second, his movies usually end with either disillusion or disaster of the main characters. Most of the villains are not punished as is the common practice in mainstream Thai movies. Prince Chatrichalerm tells his audiences that what they see on the screen is what they are facing in real life, and that it is still going on because of all the selfish human beings who are still around. Third, although the hero and the heroine are easy to identify, they are not flawless or completely virtuous, as is usually the case in popular Thai movies. Their shortcomings usually stem from their own naivety. Most of the characters are from upcountry. They often come to Bangkok hoping to start a new life full of

hope. Although the endings of his movies are far from happy, he always shows the solution to the problems posed in the movie.

Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol's movies are the ideal models for present day Thai movies. By basing his movies on characters that the majority of Thai people can relate to, he succeeds in getting his audiences involved in the characters' struggles. He leads movie audiences away from considering the characters in the movies as representatives of their dreams so that they become the characters who represent reality.

When the history of Thai movies is considered from its inception to the present time, it is obvious that it has moved away from the influence of traditional Thai performing arts. Several characteristics borrowed from other art forms, especially stage plays, have gradually become obsolete. The clown is no longer an indispensable character. The linkage between the audience and the performance no longer exists. And, although audiences still prefer to see villains being punished, the hero and heroine get the rewards they deserve, and the disrupted community go back to its peaceful beginning, they are more willing to accept the idea that the opposite is sometimes unavoidable. The characters have become more realistic. The heroes have shortcomings, the villains have reasons to be vicious, and

the heroines are no longer required to be virgins. Although Thai audiences still prefer to see handsome heroes and beautiful heroines, they have begun to criticize the expensive and fashionable clothes and heavy make-up that most leading females used to wear. Thus, in terms of characterization, Thai movies have moved away from the idealistic and toward the realistic.

From this study, it is evident that Thai movies have already found their direction. As Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol suggested, Thai audiences are more interested in seemingly insignificant people than characters with unusual traits or wealth, who live privileged lives. The majority of Thai people are in the lower class and struggle to have enough to eat and to keep a roof above their heads. The new generation of movie audiences seems to realize that dreaming away their miseries in the movie theater does not help improve their lives. They want to see characters to whom they can relate. For example, Wai Ollawon (directed by Somboonsuk Niyomsiri), a movie about a poor young man from the country who came to Bangkok for his education, reminds a number of Thai men and women of their own lives or of someone they know. The simple stories which Prince Chatrichalerm referred to as seemingly insignificant situations are easier to stage and look more realistic. Commonplace stories do not require elaborate, costly sets.

Niyomsiri shot the entire film on location where the story actually took place. This technique is very practical in the Thai film industry where the budget for each production is meager. Simple characters and simple plots are also easier to universalize. As a matter of fact, most people in the West tend to relate third world countries such as Thailand with poverty. To see fashionably dressed characters living lavish lifestyles in a country where more than seventy percent of the population live far below an average standard of living seems out of place.

These suggestions provide a starting point for a movie. The next step is a serious study of that particular group of people in the society. Unfortunately, very few filmmakers in Thailand take this step seriously. The result is a superficial portrayal of characters and their lives. Again, Prince Chatrichalerm is very good at observing the subjects of his films. The characters he creates are always true to life. The tastes of Thai movie audiences have changed a great deal in the past decade. Although good-hearted and virtuous heroes and heroines are still preferred by audiences, today's audiences accept the belief that glamorous and extravagant people cannot survive in everyday society.

In spite of all the changes and innovations in Thai movies, one aspect still remains. The majority of Thai audiences still consider movies as purely entertainment.

Thus, they still expect to see everything in a movie from romantic love to comic relief to gun or fist fights. An important challenge for Thai filmmakers today who try to make superior movies is to satisfy their audiences' expectations without ruining the artistic and commercial balance of a movie. Several filmmakers are capable of incorporating all these features into their movies. Vajit Khunavutt, for example, is a director who is always successful in incorporating the artistic consideration of a movie with its marketing potential. It is obvious that Thai filmmakers cannot yet completely discard the old style of movie content. The key is that whatever is included in a movie should have a rightful place there. It should not be there merely to attract audiences. That strategy does not work any longer. Modern Thai audiences look at the cause and effect of each event they see. In the past, most filmmakers in Thailand did not pay much attention to scripts. Any part of a script could be changed at any time for the convenience of shooting, regardless of how the change affected the entire story. However, because the script is the blueprint of a movie, a lot of attention should be given to it. A script should be checked and rechecked to make sure that there are absolutely no loopholes in it. Everything that appears in a script should be there for a reason.

The unique format of Thai movies continues to be a very shady area. In the past several years, several improvements in the camera set-up, lighting, production technique, and editing have been made. However, none of the filmmakers who were interviewed for this study had a clear concept of what the form of Thai movies should be. Most believed that Western style is the best way to tell a story. Although a few Thai filmmakers, such as Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, Somboonsuk Niyomsiri, and Vijit Khunavutt, have already reached the highest level of duplication and innovation in the area of content, form is still in a period of trial and error. Veteran filmmakers understand the tastes of audiences better than do newcomers in the movie industry. They are at the forefront in educating audiences in how to read a movie, whereas young filmmakers prefer to copy shot-by-shot from Hollywood and other Western movies.

Thai audiences can follow stories with flashbacks or flash forwards much better today. The set no longer has to be brightly lit at every spot, and audiences can now accept the idea that night scenes can be dimly lit. Despite all of the changes in the perceptions of Thai audiences, however, they still do not care much about the camera set-up or editing technique. Thai audiences are still more concerned with the content of a movie than with its form.

Suggestions for Film Education
Programs in Thailand

Several factors contribute to the inadequacy of film education in Thailand, such as a lack of qualified instructors, a lack of funds to support students' productions, and a lack of up-to-date equipment for use by students.

However, the discussion in this section concerns only one area which will provide students with the skills to work in the film industry--film curriculum.

As mentioned in Chapter V, the film industry in Thailand has many problems that require a great deal of tolerance from everyone who decides to become involved. For this reason, students must be well-prepared for whatever they will encounter. One way that students can learn to adapt to the hardships they will face in the actual production of movies is through extensive practical training. At present, film education programs are designed for students to finish their training in one semester. One semester is not enough to prepare a student to survive in the filmmaking industry in Thailand. Students' practical training should begin with the first semester of the senior year and should require two courses to complete. Students who plan to work in areas such as video production or advertising should be allowed to choose their own projects in those areas because the costs are not as high as for producing even a short film.

Each student who is working on practical training should be assigned at least one advisor to give advice and guidance through the right track. This advisor should either be the instructor or the movie director the student is working with. The conclusion of students' training should require a report of what the students have learned and accomplished in their studies.

The structure of film education programs should be reevaluated. More attention should be given to the development of a Thai film's aesthetics than to the duplication of Western movies. If possible, a course should be offered in the history and development of Thai films. In the current required course in Thai study that every student has to take in his freshman or sophomore year, students do not learn much. Most students only take the course because they are required to do so. By the time they start their junior year, they have already forgotten what they learned in the course. In studying the history of Thai films, students should also study Thai culture, traditions, and the way of life of Thai people.

Suggestions for the structure of a required course in the history and development of Thai films are as follows:

Part one should include an overview of Thai culture, the way of life, basic characteristics of Thai performing arts, and how they influence the development of Thai movies.

Part two should cover the development of Thai movies, from 1897, when S. G. Marchovsky showed the first movie in Bangkok, until the present time. An economy and sociopolitical situations in each period play an important role in shaping the content of movies made during a particular period; therefore, they should be studied in detail.

Part three should include a study of the overall development of Thai movies. This final part should point out to students the direction that the development of Thai movies has taken in the past and the direction Thai movies are moving toward. This training will allow students to understand the entire picture of what constitutes Thai films as an art form. The expectation for this course is that from everything the students learn in class they can formulate their own ideas about the ideal look and content of movies that are suitable for Thai audiences.

The film curriculum should be structured so that students can understand the real causes of the inadequacies of current Thai movies. From that knowledge, coupled with enough skill from actual training, future filmmakers can improve them. It is difficult to change the film industry itself. However, with a new breed of filmmakers who have adequate educational backgrounds in the study of film production within the Thai social context and culture, it should be possible to improve the quality of Thai movies.

Several scholars and filmmakers have discussed the need to cultivate Thai audiences. Their belief that the audiences' perceptions are too narrow is more dream than reality. No one can teach fifty-five million people how to watch movies intellectually. However, close study of the development of Thai movies reveals that the tastes and perceptions of Thai audiences have improved gradually over time. It is important that film educators see this improvement and understand the pattern of such development.

Filmmakers who have a formal educational background in filmmaking or other related fields have increasingly become the majority of movie-makers in Thailand. Throughout the years, this desire for education has proved that filmmakers place a crucial value on the survival of Thai movies. The old generation of filmmakers have begun to lose their power. Filmmakers can no longer resist change and innovation. As a result, the industry looks into the new generation of filmmakers for help in saving it.

The old way of teaching film in higher institutions does not work very well, however, students should no longer be obsessed with the look and content of Western movies. This has been the trend for the past ten years. Some filmmakers have copied scene by scene from them. The result has been that most of the audience has become alienated. The time has come for educators to look at their film

curriculum and to realize its weaknesses. Film students in Thailand should learn more about the development of Thai movies, how they reflect or can reflect the way of life of the Thai people, what kind of messages they can convey best to Thai audiences, and what roles the culture and social situations play in shaping the form and content of Thai movies. Courses in the history and theory of Western films can continue to give film students an overall view of how movies began and have developed. However, it is more important that students understand the role of movies within the context of Thai society and culture so that they can use that knowledge realistically to improve the value of Thai movies.

APPENDIX

TABLES

Table 1.--Foreign Film Imports Into Thailand, 1938-1940.

Source	1938-1939		1939-1940	
	Footage	Royalty (US\$)	Footage	Royalty (US\$)
British Malay States	---	---	44,367	2,038
Burma	---	---	24,049	385
China	34,141	1,850	1,535	77
Denmark	19,140	793	3,434	54
France	---	---	86	12
Germany	1,978	29	8,465	145
Hong Kong	260,741	12,448	349,897	15,301
Hungary	---	---	600	31
India	---	---	26,189	1,192
Indochina	145,651	7,755	178,905	7,563
Italy	---	---	256	37
Japan	47,524	1,831	88,853	3,655
Netherlands	---	---	1,355	179
Penang	4,000	352	11,426	423
Philippine Islands	---	---	316	38
Singapore	5,313,603	283,800	5,965,840	278,036
United Kingdom	31,469	1,107	19,101	904
United States	36,742	1,034	171,286	7,796
Total	5,894,989	310,999	6,895,960	317,866

Source: Boonyaketmala, Boonrak. 1992. The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand. East-West Film Journal 6·2 (July): 68).

Table 2.--Number of Films Passed by the Film Censorship Committee of Thailand, 1961 to 1976

Year	US	UK	Italy	Hong Kong/			India	Others	Thailand	Total	Foreign Exchange
				Taiwan	Japan	Taiwan					
1961	157	7	---	102	52	54	38	48	458	1.245	
1962	170	9	---	99	56	56	49	56	495	1.180	
1963	182	12	---	119	76	53	49	44	535	1.105	
1964	162	17	---	88	69	42	59	46	483	1.335	
1965	163	2	---	106	53	29	45	68	466	1.440	
1966	167	11	---	63	44	25	71	71	452	1.765	
1967	173	12	---	59	41	30	104	68	487	2.110	
1968	205	10	---	116	18	33	101	79	562	2.050	
1969	190	4	---	144	5	28	87	83	541	2.040	
1970	199	4	63	180	18	41	26	73	604	2.725	
1971	164	31	77	125	52	30	56	74	610	2.335	
1972	371	18	73	111	49	28	218	71	839	2.300	
1973	210	25	97	219	15	69	55	81	771	2.235	
1974	176	13	83	198	15	49	35	83	653	2.935	
1975	199	16	118	163	17	50	45	91	799	3.340	
1976	190	14	42	155	11	58	44	130	644	3.250	
Total	2,978	205	553	2,047	601	675	1,082	1,166	9,395	33.380	

Source: Boonyaketmala, Boonrak. 1992. The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand. East-West Film Journal 6.2 (July): 78.

Table 3.--Number of Films Passed by the Film Censorship Committee of Thailand, 1977 to 1989

Year	US	UK	Italy	Hong Kong/				India	Others	Thailand	Total	Foreign Exchange
				Taiwan	Japan	India	Others					
1977	153	9	27	159	9	38	33	115	543	2,405		
1978	169	4	21	161	13	14	19	161	562	1,620		
1979	60	5	7	156	5	14	13	120	380	1,985		
1980	71	1	7	171	3	14	8	125	400	3,425		
1981	104	4	6	197	7	14	3	138	413	4,778		
1982	119	2	2	114	4	5	4	117	367	6,017		
1983	126	4	---	115	3	3	6	109	363	n.a.		
1984	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	386	5,600		
1985	107	---	4	63/3	3	---	3	148	329	5,040		
1986	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	n.a.	2,400		
1987	95	---	---	79	3	---	3	121	301	3,520		
1988	88	---	---	98	2	---	5	118	311	3,520		
1989	82	---	---	108/1	8	1	1	109	310	---		
Total	1,170	29	74	1,419	60	100	98	1,381	4,665	40,310		

Source: Boonyaketmala, Boonrak. 1992. The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand. East-West Film Journal 6.2 (July): 88.

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